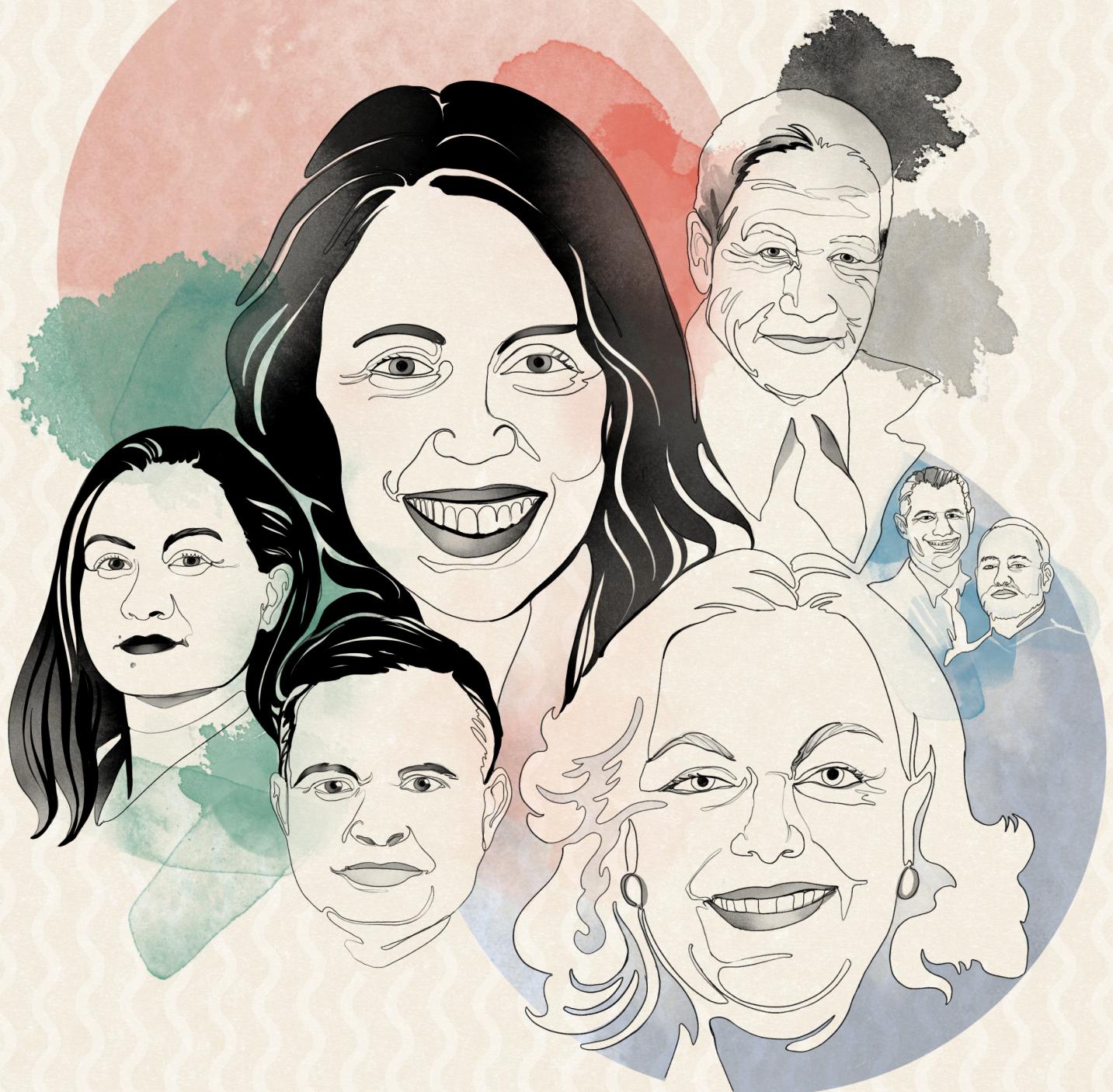


Fightback

Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism



Issue 40:
Electoral Politics

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[Cover illustration shows New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern with Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, National leader Judith Collins, Green co-leaders Marama Davidson and James Shaw, and New Zealand Public Party co-leaders Billy Te Kahika and Jami-Lee Ross.]

Editorial

The anti-capitalist Left, among which *Fightback* counts itself, is unified on the idea that electoral politics will never really “deliver the goods” in terms of a socialist transformation of society and popular democracy. But can it be “part of a complete breakfast”, as the cliché goes?

Our major article in this issue deals with the question of Left-populist political movements, taking an international view which specifically looks at the records of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. Our analysis is that these movements have offered *false hope* to the activist Left, who have in turn transmitted unrealistic expectations to their audience. Although very different in many ways, the Corbyn and Sanders movements both combined a supportable social democratic manifesto with an electoral populist form of organisation (relying strongly on a form of “personality cult” behind the leader) and “revolutionary” aesthetics. On the one hand, this combination muddled the distinction between left-wing reforms within the system and “socialism” understood as worker’s power and anti-capitalism; on the other hand, it exaggerated the differences between Corbyn and Sanders and the centrist “establishment” against which their movement was primarily directed. We discuss this in light of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s “post-Marxist” theories of populism, and counterpose the idea that really effective “populism” should mean organising popular power for direct action, and treating electoral politics as a secondary tactic of “choosing our preferred enemy”.

This issue is appearing before the New Zealand parliamentary elections, rescheduled to October 17th due to a fresh outbreak of COVID-19. Thus, most of this issue’s remaining articles centre specifically around what that election might mean for the anti-capitalist Left in Aotearoa New Zealand. We offer interviews with fighters for social justice within the Green Party of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and a perspective from anti-capitalist former Green MP Sue Bradford. We critically examine the record of Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, whose performance of basic empathy around the 2019 Christchurch mosque massacres and this year’s COVID pandemic have won her a certain ‘fan base’ overseas, in comparison to the outright cruelty and indifference shown by their own governments. However – just as in the case of the impending US Presidential elections – we have to combine recognition of a lesser evil under capitalism with clearly pointing out why that’s still not good enough, and why only mass action of working people and the oppressed can really deliver the goods.

Left Populism at the dead end: where to after Corbyn and Sanders?

by DAPHNE LAWLESS

Introduction: the dream is over

On 8th April 2020, Keir Starmer replaced Jeremy Corbyn as the leader of the British Labour Party, following that party's trouncing by Boris Johnson's Conservatives in the December 2019 election. On the same day, Senator Bernie Sanders suspended his campaign for the Democratic nomination for US president, soon after his disappointing results in the "Super Tuesday" Presidential primary elections which were dominated decisively by centrist former Vice-President Joe Biden.

To be dramatic, we could call this "the day the dream ended". That dream was one shared by much of the Left over the last ten years: that nascent Left-wing "populist" electoral movements across the world, often arising from protest movements such as Occupy or the demonstrations against austerity in Greece, would arise to defeat both the neoliberal establishment and the rising tide of Right-wing populist, even fascist, movements. Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders are the names most commonly associated with this movement in English speaking countries, but other movements such as PODEMOS in the Spanish state, or SYRIZA in Greece, have also caused much excitement on the broader Left. The former is currently the junior coalition government partner in Spain, and the latter was the government of Greece from 2015-2019.¹ Further back in history, the "pink tide" governments in Latin America, most famously that of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, can also

As it turned out, there was something of a landslide on "Super Tuesday", 3rd March 2020, when 14 states held their primaries. Turnout for the Democratic

be seen in this category. So why has this "Left-populist" wave reached such a dead end? And was it a wrong direction to start with?

Bernie Sanders: where was the turnout?

The strongest argument for Bernie Sanders' campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination was always that "Bernie" was unique in having a mass movement behind him dominated by youth, who were excited and motivated by his social-democratic, anti-establishment message. None of the other, centrist candidates, the argument went, could match the "enthusiasm" and "energy" of the Bernie wave – and if Bernie were to be nominated, this wave would then go on to completely swamp the Trump campaign. Excitable online leftists, such as Will Menaker from the podcast *Chapo Trap House*, enthused about how the centrist Democrat establishment would soon have to "bend the knee" before the Bernie movement², while journalist David Klion was even more optimistic about the future:



David Klion 🔥 ✅

@DavidKlion

Replying to @charles_gaba

When Bernie wins the primaries I hope you cry about it and when you're forced to vote for him I hope you cry more

4:30 PM · Jan 4, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

primaries was much higher than in 2016; in states such as Virginia, it doubled.³ African-Americans, Latin@s and others in working-class suburbs queued

¹ Fightback previously published an analysis of SYRIZA's own dead end – <https://fightback.org.nz/2015/08/21/greek-crisis-syrizas-dead-end/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/22/chapo-trap-house-podcast-dirtbag-left-takes-aim-at-clinton-supporters>

³ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/3/4/21164518/super-tuesday-results-voter-turnout>

for up to 7 hours (due to deliberate underprovision of polling places by Republican state governments) to vote...⁴ and the results were excellent for Joe Biden, and disappointing for Bernie Sanders, essentially ending the latter's chances of winning the nomination.

The immediate counter-reaction from the Sanders camp was to point out that overwhelmingly older voters (tending to support Biden) had turned out, while younger, more Sanders-inclined voters didn't. But that begs the question. *Bernie's fabled support had not appeared at the polls.* Of course, polling times and polling places were inconvenient for young people – exactly as they will be in the November general election. No matter the quality of the Sanders programme, this was powerful negative evidence about his ability to defeat Donald Trump.

One explanation was this was a real-time demonstration of "Cuomo's Law". In 2019, the centrist governor of New York state, Andrew Cuomo, was challenged from the Left by Cynthia Nixon, an actress best known for her role in the TV show *Sex and the City*. Her campaign was extremely popular on social media, but in the end Cuomo defeated her by 31 points.⁵ The social media "buzz" behind Nixon ended up having little relevance to actual elections. Hence, one Twitter user suggested "Cuomo's Law": that online politics have nothing to do with real life.⁶ That is, the argument was that the Sanders mass movement was only an Internet phenomenon, unable to be translated into ballots going into boxes.

Others have given more substantive political analyses for why the Sanders campaign stalled in the primaries. Journalist Zack Beauchamp argues:

Sen. Bernie Sanders's theory of victory was simple: An unapologetically socialist politics centering Medicare-for-all and welfare state expansions would unite the working class and turn out young people at unprecedented rates, creating a multiracial, multigenerational coalition that could lead Sanders to the Democratic

nomination and the White House... In a 2019 essay in the socialist magazine Jacobin, Princeton professor Matt Karp staked his case for Sanders on the candidate's ability to win over economically precarious voters by appealing to their common interest.

In the end, this approach failed. It was former Vice President Joe Biden, not Bernie Sanders, who assembled a multiracial working-class coalition in key states like Michigan — where Biden won every single county, regardless of income levels or racial demographics.

Sanders had success in shifting the Democratic Party in his direction on policy. But the strategy for winning power embraced by his partisans depended on a mythologized and out-of-date theory of blue-collar political behavior, one that assumes that a portion of the electorate is crying out for socialism on the basis of their class interest. Identity, in all its complexities, appears to be far more powerful in shaping voters' behaviors than the material interests given pride of place in Marxist theory.⁷

Those who really believed that the Sanders campaign was a "political revolution" that would destroy the centrist Clinton/Obama/Biden Democrats as well as the Trumpist Republicans must have been disoriented that Bernie Sanders has joined Joe Biden in rejecting the quite moderate slogan of "Defund the Police"⁸; or when Sanders argues that Biden might turn out to be "the most progressive President since Franklin Roosevelt".⁹ If we believe the analysis of David Atkins, this statement by Sanders (quite wild on the surface) might make some sense:

The reality is that leftist *policy* has never been more ascendant in the Democratic Party since at least the 1960s if not the 1930s. The Biden 2020 campaign platform is well to the left of the Clinton 2016 platform, which was itself well to the left of the Obama 2008 platform. Every

⁴ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/super-tuesday-results-2020-primary-texas-voter-suppression-lines-long-wait-queues-a9373886.html>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/nyregion/andrew-cuomo-cynthia-nixon-wins-governors-race.html>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/marcushjohnson/status/1240117667287228416>

⁷ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/4/10/21214970/bernie-sanders-2020-lost-class-socialism>

⁸ <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/sanders-says-i-dont-agree-with-to-abolish-police-departments>

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieFL8StRyJo&feature=youtu.be>

major candidate in the 2020 field ran either on some version of Medicare for All, or at least a public option and Medicare expansion as a pathway toward it.

Every major candidate proposed much bolder action on climate change than the Obama administration, and major policies to address student debt and college tuition. And on social policy from LGBT rights to criminal justice, the difference between the Democratic Party of today and that of 10 years ago could not be more stark. Most of those advances are due to the hard work of leftists whose tireless advocacy has successfully won the force of moral argument and persuaded mainstream Democratic base voters and independents.¹⁰

The Democratic Party has moved to at least rhetorically embrace some of the reforms demanded by the ongoing Black Lives Matter uprising.¹¹ While there is cause for scepticism that fine words in opposition will mean anything if and when Biden makes it into the White House, results from recent Democratic primaries suggest that a new crop of progressive legislators will be joining Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others in the House of Representatives to push for these ideas.¹² The movement to elect candidates (almost inevitably from within the Democratic Party) who will promote economic justice, universal healthcare and other supportable reforms can and should continue, intersecting with Black Lives Matter and all the other mass movements for justice and dignity.

In contrast, the presidential election is now a simple referendum on the accelerating, murderous and increasingly authoritarian disaster. This analysis seems to embody “Cuomo’s Law”, in that it makes perfect sense for a certain online Left bubble, but does not take into account the disconnect between “very online leftists” and the

of Trumpism. Biden’s lead in the polls corresponds with more than 170,000 dead in the COVID-19 pandemic due to federal non-response; plain-clothes federal agents snatching protestors off the streets of Portland; Trump’s blatant misuses of power to harass personal enemies, exonerate criminals who happen to be his allies, and attempt to depress voter turnout; levels of graft and self-dealing within the administration which are beginning to disgust many lifelong conservatives and corporate donors; and Trump’s increasingly naked appeal to racism, xenophobia and bloodlust.

Given all of this, Biden’s greyness, “easy-going” persona and appeal to nostalgia is proving extremely popular in the polls, to the point where he hardly seems to need to leave his house to campaign. While Sanders himself has embraced party discipline and swung his full support against Biden, an initial common reaction from his supporters to their defeat was dire prophecies that Biden would fail to motivate voters, and be utterly trounced in the general election by incumbent President Donald Trump. Some, such as the British-based magazine *Salvage*,¹³ but many others online, even concluded that the Democratic Party leadership knows full well that Biden will not and even cannot win against Trump, and that they supported his doomed candidacy because Bernie was seen as a greater threat.

Salvage Perspectives #8: Comrades, This is Madness

by Salvage Editorial Collective

If you mean to win an election, you don’t make Biden your candidate.

It is not merely that Biden is a far less gifted orator, debater and pugilist than Sanders – or, indeed, in his own unique, unlikely and effective idiom, than Trump. It is not just that Biden’s vacuous bipartisan message is no match for Trump’s ruthless racist *kulturkampf*. It is not just that Biden was always a dozen #metoo cases waiting to happen, up to his neck in a sea of allegations of harassment, groping and sexual assault. It is not just that Biden can scarcely recall his lines these days, let alone formulate a coherent, completed sentence. It is that neither Biden nor anyone around him shows any sign of having understood why and how they were defeated in 2016.’

¹⁰ <https://www.inquisitr.com/columnists/attytood/trump-presidential-election-joe-biden-democrat-hillary-clinton-misogyny-20200702.html>

¹¹ <https://www.vox.com/21299730/george-floyd-democratic-party-joe-biden-black-lives-matter-protests-2020-identity-politics>; <https://www.wonkette.com/joe-biden-wants-to-be-your-fdr>

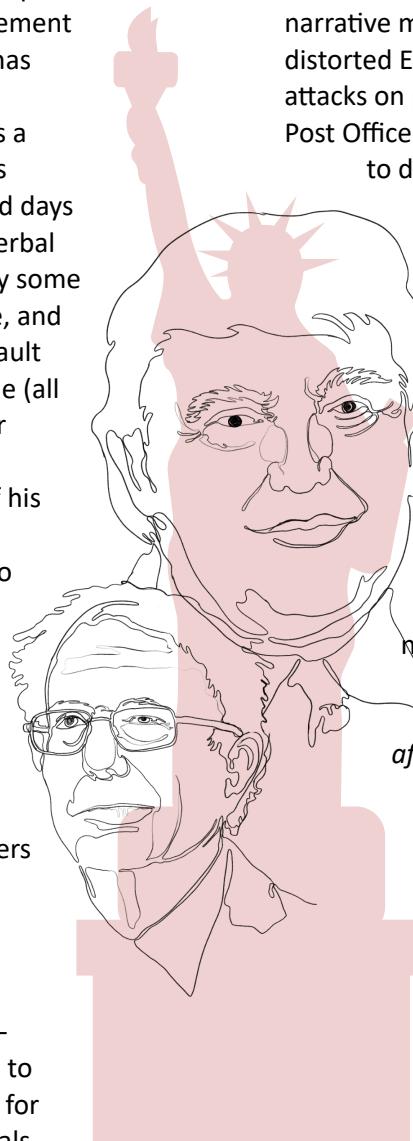
¹² <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/24/progressives-primary-justice-democrats-338488>

¹³ <https://salvage.zone/articles/salvage-perspectives-8-comrades-this-is-madness>

actually-existing masses of working people, who took to the polls despite suppression to make Biden their standard-bearer against Trump.

We must of course fight any beliefs that Democrats in power will do anything better than restoring “capitalist normality”, except under the pressure of a mass movement backed by labour action. The Left has good reason to be repelled by Joe Biden’s moderate-at-best record as a legislator and as Vice President, his appeal to nostalgia for the good old days of bipartisanship, his stutter and verbal gaffes which are wrongly argued by some to be evidence of cognitive decline, and the believable claims of sexual assault against him by ex-staffer Tara Reade (all things that *Salvage* exaggerates for polemical effect). Similarly, it is important to critique the record of his running mate, Kamala Harris, as Attorney-General of California, who sued to deny trans prisoners health care and in many other ways upheld the very prison-industrial complex that the BLM/George Floyd protests are up against.¹⁴

It was completely correct for Sanders and Warren to mount a strenuous campaign against the “business as usual, back to normality” retro-neoliberalism presented by Biden and the other centrist candidates – and the activist Left must continue to hold Biden and Harris accountable for both their record and their proposals for office. But Biden showed support where it matters for electoral politics, at the ballot box in the primaries (by a significantly larger margin than Clinton in 2016) against all his Democratic challengers of both centrist and liberal varieties, who had none of the personal problems mentioned above. Moreover, according to the latest polling, Biden is currently also winning it handily against incumbent President Donald Trump – who has *all* of Biden’s problems, and more besides, in addition to



his repulsive personality and increasingly fascistic politics.

This article is being written months before the November election, and it is of course still possible that Trump’s increasingly naked appeal to naked authoritarianism, racist violence and a “culture war” narrative might pull him over the line in the distorted Electoral College. Or, failing that, his attacks on postal voting and attempts to defund the Post Office might become part of a wider movement to discredit or even rig the election, after which he would simply dare Democrats to try to shift him out of the White House. However, the Black, migrant, queer, working-class and other oppressed communities of the United States are not going to be won to an insurrectionist perspective until they have exhausted the electoral route. It is one thing to counsel preparations for mass strikes and insurrection should Trump successfully rig the election; it is a bridge too far, here and now, to suggest giving up on the presidential election altogether. Even in Belarus, the masses waited until *after* Lukashenko’s rigged election to rise up.

In any case, the question of Trump rigging the election would be also faced by a Sanders-led ticket. Right now, Biden is ahead by an average of more than 7 points in opinion polls, a level Clinton in 2016 never reached.¹⁵ Arguments that Bernie Sanders would be in a better position to lead opposition to Trump had he won the nomination are unfalsifiable and therefore useless. Leftists who have gone from cheerleading Sanders’ left-electoral programme to counselling electoral nihilism seem more interested in finding an excuse, any excuse, not to vote for Biden and Harris than in seriously building mass politics. A more useful reaction to the Sanders defeat is probably this:

Bernie collecting millions of campaign dollars from young, unemployed & marginalized people,

¹⁴ <https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2019/1/22/kamala-harris-takes-responsibility-opposing-trans-surgeries>

¹⁵ See https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2020/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_biden-6247.html for up-to-date figures.

just to bow out, endorse Biden & stand against defunding police—which is the start of abolition — is a good reminder that career politicians are not for you. Righteousness is w/ the people.¹⁶

Meanwhile, in Britain...

When *Fightback* wrote about Jeremy Corbyn's movement in 2017, after British Labour's much better than expected result in the parliamentary election of that year, we credited this success to the Corbyn leadership's successful "fudge" on Brexit, refusing to take a clear Remain or Leave position.¹⁷

However, by December 2019, the benefits of ambiguity had dissolved. As the actual deadline for a final decision on Brexit drew nearer, it became clear that the Conservative government would take a "hard Brexit" (cutting all ties to the EU) as an excuse for a bonfire of laws on worker protection, human rights and even the National Health Service. This was surely the time to squarely stand for cancelling or at least delaying Brexit, rather than to continue to pretend that this issue was a distraction. Former Scottish Labour advisor Ayesha Hazarika argues:

The huge mistake that we made over Brexit was at the end, it didn't matter what our position was, it was so confusing. We tried to be all things to all people and we were like nothing to anybody, it was just the worst of all worlds.¹⁸

A commission of inquiry into Labour's defeat discovered, according to a report in *The Guardian*, that:

Helped by their clear "Get Brexit done" message, the Conservatives succeeded in turning out 2 million previous non-voters, accounting for two thirds of the increase in their vote share....

... Corbyn's leadership was a "significant factor" in the 2019 result. His public approval ratings collapsed at around the time a group of Labour MPs including Luciana Berger and Chuka

Umunna left to found the Independent Group, citing antisemitism within Labour and its Brexit policy.

The report says: "'Stop Jeremy Corbyn' was a major driver of the Conservatives' success across all their key groups including previous non-voters, and among all the swing voters Labour lost to the Tories."

Had Corbyn been as popular in December as he was two years earlier, Labour's vote share could have been 6 percentage points higher, the analysis finds.

When it came to Labour's radical manifesto, launched at an upbeat rally in Birmingham, the analysis found that individual policies were popular, but doubts about the leadership stoked a perception that the package as a whole was not deliverable.¹⁹

The response heard very often on the Left is that Jeremy Corbyn was defeated by smears in the fanatically Right-wing British press, and sabotage by centrist and "Blairite" rebels in his own caucus. It's undisputed that, like Bernie Sanders, Corbyn was running against much of his own party, never mind the Tories. But to accept this "stab-in-the-back legend" as the main explanation serves to deflect any criticism of Corbyn and his movement, thus making it impossible for the movement to learn from its mistakes and to self-correct.

To a large extent, the Corbyn takeover of the Labour Party was the victory of the "activist Left" in Britain. This may be hard to imagine from Australia or New Zealand, two countries in which there is no longer any significant class-struggle, strongly social-democratic tendency in our Labo(u)r Parties.²⁰ But the "hard Left" in the British Labour Party, which had been ruthlessly excluded from the leading bodies of the party and of the union movement for 30 years, jumped at the new rules for electing the

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/yohannabeee/status/1271155114569424896>

¹⁷ <https://fightback.org.nz/2017/10/17/winning-with-conservative-leftism-jeremy-corbyn-and-brexit/>

¹⁸ <https://corbynismpostmortem.wordpress.com/2020/01/31/episode-3-transcription/>

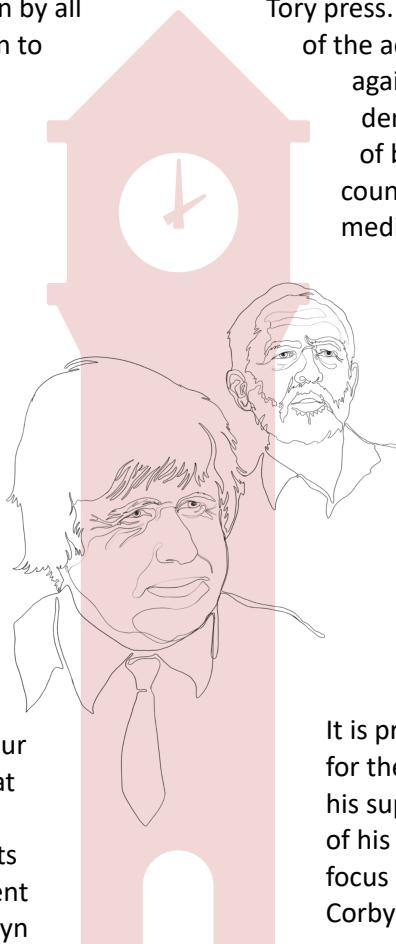
¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/18/dysfunctional-toxic-culture-led-to-labour-defeat-major-report-finds>

²⁰ If an equivalent of the Corbyn or Sanders movements exist in mainstream politics in Australasia, it's in the Green parties.

leader which came into force in 2015, making it a simple “one member, one vote” decision by all party members,²¹ which enabled Corbyn to do an “end run” around his institutional opponents and pull off a shock victory.²²

But this strength was also its weakness. Many commentators in America have noted the problems that the US radical Left, having been confined to a campus-based subculture for decades, have had with having to adapt their language to the mass politics needed to win elections. The “anti-Semitism scandal” which bedevilled Corbyn’s tenure as leader can be seen from one angle as an example of this.²³

Jeremy Corbyn had long been one of the most prominent advocates of Palestinian liberation in the British Labour Party. It should be no surprise, then, that his leadership of the Labour Party brought certain very problematic aspects of the Western pro-Palestinian movement into mainstream politics. Whether Corbyn personally holds anti-Semitic beliefs, even unconsciously, is irrelevant to the issue of his defence of a notorious mural using anti-Semitic tropes,²⁴ or his laying of a wreath in front of the grave of a PLO leader who authorised the 1972 massacre of Israeli Olympic athletes,²⁵ and the reactions which these provoked among British Jews,



which were of course gleefully promoted by the Tory press. The Corbyn leadership’s reproduction of the activist Left’s usual rhetorical moves against accusations of anti-Semitism – denials, defensiveness, and accusations of bad faith – were ineffective and even counterproductive in the mainstream media arena.²⁶

Editor of [politics.co.uk](#) Ian Dunt argues that anti-Semitism in British Labour

was allowed to take root and spread because people who were not anti-Semitic relegated it to secondary importance. Defending Corbyn was the chief moral requirement. Everything else could be sacrificed in order to secure that aim. It was, at its heart, a matter of priorities.²⁷

It is probably best to see Corbyn’s tolerance for the expression of anti-Semitic tropes by his supporters within Labour in the context of his foreign policy, which was his major focus before he became Labour leader.²⁸ Corbyn’s foreign policy has always been, in common with most the British activist Left, a “campist” one – the benefit of the doubt has always been with those forces in geopolitical opposition to the Western states and to Israel.

Corbyn’s categorization of the armed opposition to the Assad dictatorship in Syria as “jihadis” and “Salafists”²⁹ could have come right out of a Russian

²¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Labour_Party_leadership_election_\(UK\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2015_Labour_Party_leadership_election_(UK))

²² This appeal of a leader-figure over the heads of representative or intermediary bodies to an atomised mass of individuals is an essential feature of populist politics, as we will explore further below.

²³ In what follows, I will attempt to analyse, not Jeremy Corbyn as a person, but the movement which he led and to some extent embodied.

²⁴ <https://fightback.org.nz/2018/08/01/10842/>

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corbyn_wreath-laying_controversy

²⁶ <https://theconversation.com/labour-and-anti-semitism-these-are-the-roots-of-the-problem-on-the-left-94923>

²⁷ <https://www.politics.co.uk/blogs/2020/06/26/week-in-review-labour-returns-to-its-anti-racist-roots>

²⁸ Journalist Jonathan Freedland suggests that Corbyn enjoyed the reputation of “being the foreign minister of the Left” (<https://corbynismpostmortem.wordpress.com/2020/01/16/episode-1-transcription/>)

²⁹ <https://jeremycorbyn.org.uk/articles/jeremy-corbyns-speech-against-military-intervention-in-syria/>

Foreign Ministry press release. But for ordinary British voters, perhaps more shocking was his attempt to cast doubt upon the responsibility of Russian spooks for the nerve-gas poisoning of defector Sergei Skripal on British soil.³⁰ Before he became leader, Corbyn sponsored a Parliamentary motion which denied that Serbian forces had committed genocide in Kosovo,³¹ and claimed to recognize “the hand of Israel” in a jihadi attack against Egyptian forces in the Sinai Peninsula in 2012.³²

As I explained in my 2015 article *Against Campism*,³³ over much of the activist Left in Western countries, healthy suspicion of Western “humanitarian” motives for military interventions has collapsed into denial and conspiracy theory when it comes to crimes committed by non-Western states. The deep intertwining of the issues of Labour’s anti-Semitism problem with Corbyn’s campist foreign policy is particularly clear in the case of Corbyn’s defence of his staunch supporter, Chris Williamson MP. Williamson was suspended from the Labour Party for denying that there was any anti-Semitism problem; but he was also a promoter of pro-Assad conspiracy theories and chemical warfare denial.³⁴ Former Labour councillor Adam Langaben argues that the Corbyn movement’s penchant for

conspiracy theory (in foreign policy, in their dealings with the media, and in their reactions to intra-party opposition) inevitably led them to anti-Semitic tropes.³⁵

It is also no coincidence that two of Corbyn’s closest allies, Seumas Milne³⁶ and Andrew Murray, were political veterans of the section of British Communism which has historically promoted Soviet and later Russian foreign policy aims. Murray in particular was associated closely with the *Morning Star* newspaper,³⁷ which ran a front-page article cheering the murderous Assad regime’s recapture of free Aleppo as a “liberation”³⁸ and, more recently, dived into TERF politics.³⁹ Corbyn himself wrote a notable article in the *Morning Star*, before he became Leader, apologizing for Russia’s invasion and occupation of eastern Ukraine as being provoked by NATO.⁴⁰

It may be shocking to a broad audience that many within the activist Left would argue that there was nothing wrong, and certainly nothing anti-Semitic, about most of the above positions. The stock line is that because George W. Bush and Tony Blair lied about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, then any Western/Israeli reports of atrocities must be treated with the deepest suspicion.⁴¹ But as I pointed out in my 2018 article *The Red-Brown Zombie Plague*,⁴²

³⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-russia-spy-nerve-agent-iraq-war-wmd-labour-theresa-may-a8256021.html>

³¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/08/17/uk-labour-frontrunner-queried-on-kosovo-motion-08-17-2015/>

³² <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/uk-labour-leader-corbyn-voices-conspiracy-theory-against-israel-in-2012-563714>

³³ <https://fightback.org.nz/2015/11/05/against-campism-what-makes-some-leftists-support-putin/>

³⁴ <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2018/08/labour-can-be-jo-cox-s-party-or-chris-williamson-s-it-cannot-be-both>

³⁵ <https://corbynismpostmortem.wordpress.com/2020/01/16/episode-1-transcription/>

³⁶ <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/media/2015/10/i-wanted-believe-jeremy-corbyn-i-cant-believe-seumas-milne>

³⁷ Short, shameful confession: the author of this article wrote a piece on New Zealand politics for the *Morning Star* in 2014. I don’t remember their politics being so bad at that point.

³⁸ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/morning-star-labour-mps-aleppo_uk_584f2931e4b0b7ff851db424

³⁹ <https://metro.co.uk/2020/02/23/newspaper-apologises-transphobic-cartoon-sparks-outrage-12287799/>

⁴⁰ <https://web.archive.org/web/20150923060138/http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-972b-Nato-belligerence-endangers-us-all>

⁴¹ As recently replicated by the extremely pro-China Socialist Action group within British Labour: <http://www.socialistaction.net/2020/08/12/the-left-should-not-be-taken-in-by-us-wmd-lies-this-time-about-uyghers/>

⁴² <https://fightback.org.nz/2018/05/09/the-red-brown-zombie-plague-part-one/>

denial of inconvenient truths by yelling “hoax” or “fake news” is precisely what we ridicule Trump fans or other Right-wing partisans for doing.

We can briefly summarize that Jeremy Corbyn took the actually-existing British activist Left movements – with all their positive and negative features – right into the heart of mainstream politics. When these contradictions were inevitably exposed by the capitalist press, voters rejected Corbyn personally – despite his generally supportable social-democratic platform. Corbyn’s campist foreign policy (and his “whataboutery” about anti-Semitism on his own side) is pretty standard for much of the activist Left in Western countries; but when it “hit the big time” in Britain, it appeared grotesque to mainstream voters and discredited his positive and supportable anti-austerity politics. Former Labour MP Ann Turley claims that her canvassing led her to believe that only 20% of Labour voters switching to Conservative were motivated by Brexit; the remainder, by anti-Corbyn sentiment.⁴³

A few years ago, a New Zealand Twitter user suggested that there is a definite constituency in elections for “soft-left but sensible ideas, if not attached to someone with a rap sheet that makes [voters] hate them”.⁴⁴ British socialists who want to rebuild an electoral challenge must examine how Jeremy Corbyn accumulated precisely such a “rap sheet”.

The theory of populism: Laclau and Mouffe

Though this article treats both Corbyn’s and Sanders’ movements as varieties of “Left-populism”, we have to pause here to emphasise the *differences* between them. These movements were very different, they had very different politics and social compositions, and they came to a “dead end” for very different reasons. To use shorthand, the Sanders campaign discovered the limits of “class-first” social democracy in an era of extreme racial and ethnic polarization; whereas the Corbyn campaign discovered that campist foreign policy, currently the common sense of the activist Left, was an easy target when playing in the political “big leagues”, and that reacting with denial, bluster, whataboutery, and claims of conspiracy didn’t help.

The biggest academic names which have featured over the last 30 years or so in recommending a “Left-populist” form of organisation have been the partnership of Argentinian Ernesto Laclau and Belgian Chantal Mouffe. Describing themselves as “post-Marxists”, their starting point is that – in the era of neoliberal globalisation – the industrial working class around which Marxist hopes had been traditionally built can no longer be the basis for a revolutionary or even a reformist challenge to the status quo, at least in Western countries. The challenge, therefore, is to build a new kind of popular majority to challenge austerity, imperialism and oppression. Though Laclau is now deceased, Mouffe carries on their work.

Laclau and Mouffe’s theories – most famously expressed in their joint work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) – make a lot of sense in an era where traditional working-class organisations and communities have collapsed, and in which “intersectional” politics of race, gender, sexuality and migration status have come to the fore. However, I intend to argue that the Corbyn and Sanders movements – and at a further remove, the more successful movements behind SYRIZA in Greece and the late Hugo Chávez in Venezuela – demonstrate serious flaws in Left-populist politics as practiced over the last 20 years, which I believe can be shown to be inherent in the populist method of organisation itself as described by Laclau and Mouffe.

The problems of populism 1: Potato sacks and dear leaders

Everyone interested in making sense of modern politics should read Karl Marx’s *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.⁴⁵ In 1848, Louis Bonaparte (nephew of the French revolutionary general and later Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte) became President of the French Republic because all the squabbling factions of the ruling class – monarchist, republican, conservative and liberal – saw him as a harmless clown who could be used and discarded. By 1852, after four years of constant fighting between these factions, President Bonaparte was able to ride a popular wave of resentment and exasperation, firstly, to carry out a coup to give himself dictatorial

⁴³ <https://corbynismpostmortem.wordpress.com/2020/01/24/episode-2-transcription/>

⁴⁴ <https://fightback.org.nz/2016/10/19/aucklands-no-choice-elections-blue-greens-and-conservative-leftists/>

⁴⁵ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/>

powers, then to make himself “Emperor Napoleon III”, in imitation of his uncle (which gave rise to Marx’s famous dictum about history repeating, first as tragedy then as farce).

Marx points out that Bonaparte’s social base was not the Parisian working class, but the French peasantry – an atomised social layer who could only be unified in the sense that potatoes are unified by putting them into a sack. This “sack” was the cult of the Bonaparte name and nostalgia for the First Empire (something we might today call “Make France Great Again”?) and a feeling of what we would now call “anti-politics” – the sentiment *i Que se vayan todos!* (They can all get out!) of the Argentinian uprising of 2002.⁴⁶ In another sense, Bonaparte and his successors repeated the successful formula of Julius Caesar, who was supported by ancient Rome’s poor and socially-excluded free citizens in overthrowing the traditional aristocracy and making himself Dictator for Life, allowing his successors to become Emperors.

Modern populist politics of both Left and Right varieties inherits this “potatoes in a sack” method of organisation, where horizontal solidarity between people and groups within the movement is less important than vertical loyalty to a unifying slogan, programme, or Leader. In his book *On Populist Reason* (Verso Books, 2004), Ernesto Laclau argues that an individual leader upon whom many different sectors of society can project their hopes and dreams is in fact a vital aspect of the populist style of organising:

An assemblage of heterogeneous elements kept equivalentially together only by a name is, however, necessarily a singularity. The less a society is kept together by immanent differential mechanisms, the more it depends, for its coherence, on this transcendent, singular moment. But the extreme form of singularity is an individuality. In this way, almost imperceptibly, the equivalential logic leads to singularity, and singularity to identification of the unity of the group with the name of the leader. (Kindle location 1728)

A less jargony way of phrasing this would be: an individual Leader becomes a logical necessity for holding together a broad movement composed of many different groups with their own demands.⁴⁷ But the problem here is that a political leader is not only a point of unity, and a symbol; *he or she is a real person with real political authority*, and the two aspects of this role contradict each other. Although Left populism assembles a different set of groups under a different programme and a different personality than Right-populism, a Leader who is a symbolic unifying figure is very hard to seriously challenge from within the movement – leading to an *essentially authoritarian relationship* between leader and led.

Laclau himself speaks later in this book about Juan Perón, the former Argentine president who became the leader of a vast and very diverse populist movement while he was exiled during the 1960s. At this time, Perón himself compared himself to the Pope – a symbol of unity and reverence. However, after Perón returned to Argentina in the 1970s – and especially after he was re-elected President – he became an actual political leader who had to make decisions which outraged either the left-wing or right-wing parts of his coalition, or both. His movement quickly dissolved, occasionally erupting into fatal violence between factions (Kindle location 3709).

Similarly, Left dissidents from the Greek Left-populist movement SYRIZA have claimed that as the organisation got closer to power, it was progressively

turn[ed...] into a leader-centred party... The aim was to move from a militant party of the left, with a strong culture of internal debate, heterogeneity, involvement in social movements and mobilizations, to a party with a passive membership which could be more easily manipulated by the centre, and keener to identify with the figure of the leader.⁴⁸

Another SYRIZA dissident suggested that this was accomplished through mechanisms of “direct democracy” which had the appearance of giving

⁴⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/feb/06/global-recession-backlash>

⁴⁷ Some of the diagrams in *On Populist Reason* which illustrate Laclau’s theory of building unity in a populist movement between different social forces depict these forces as ovals... that is, potato-shaped.

⁴⁸ <https://newleftreview.org/issues/I197/articles/stathis-kouvelakis-syriza-s-rise-and-fall.pdf>

power to the grassroots but in fact concentrated power at the top. It was suggested that the same thing was happening in Spain's PODEMOS.⁴⁹ This has uncanny parallels to the way Louis Bonaparte, as President and later as Emperor, used periodic referendums to give legitimacy to his dictatorship.

Certainly the Corbyn and Sanders campaigns both contained a minority (with an outsized presence on social media) which took on a "personality cult" aspect, intolerant of any criticism of the Leader. But an outsized role for the personality of the Leader goes hand-in-hand with a political emptiness among the "potatoes" in the populist sack – the various factions end up with very little in common except for what "team" they're on. In Adam Langaben's words:

There's no such thing as Corbynism, because Corbyn never said anything of substance. He enabled whatever he says to be so vague, that it allows his supporters to decide whatever they want, and to give his supporters permission to say and do whatever they want, because there was [sic] no red lines, he wasn't saying yes or no to anything.⁵⁰

The fact that all these populist movements have ended up in failure – even the ones which have taken State power – show a problem with not only this inherent authoritarian dynamic, but also a problem with its *horizon* – that is, the greatest extent to which it can be successful. In practice, this horizon has turned out to be at best a militant form of social democracy – a strong welfare state which guarantees certain economic benefits and political rights to all citizens, standing against the powers of "the market" and of foreign imperialism, as at the high point of Hugo Chávez's administration in Venezuela.

But, as explored by American revolutionary Hal Draper in *The Two Souls of Socialism*,⁵¹ this model is counterposed to socialism as in workers' power expressed through grassroots democracy, involving the abolition of capitalist social and economic

relations altogether. Too many modern-day "revolutionaries" seem to have forgotten there's a difference between these two meanings of "socialism". Hence nonsense propaganda like Jeremy Corbyn's face photoshopped into old Soviet or Maoist propaganda posters, or – my personal favourite – Bernie Sanders depicted as Che Guevara on T-shirts – while Corbyn was calling for more funding for police and border guards,⁵² and Bernie Sanders hardly challenged the Democrat consensus on imperialist foreign policy.

In the days when Hugo Chávez was President of Venezuela, many on the Left argued that a Left-populist, anti-imperialist State leadership would open the door for revolution from below. Sadly, this didn't happen; and now, Chávez's successors have made sure that it never will, having moved to the model of an authoritarian clientelist state in which capitalists who become "friends of the regime" are protected.⁵³ A top-down movement based around a leader with an exceptional personality, which is what populist movements tend to become in practice, cannot bring about an end to exploitation and oppression. Mistaking authoritarian, though Left-leaning, populism for socialist democracy is a mistake that the organised Left has made over and over again throughout history.

Moreover, a movement based on the personality of the Leader will find it increasingly difficult to correct the Leader when he (and it is usually a "he") makes a wrong turn – or even to accept criticism in good faith. Ian Dunt describes the reaction of the Corbyn camp to criticism:

Out they came, every time. The loyalist ranks, where Corbyn's survival mattered more than anything, and all that challenged him was by definition a conspiracy. First the anonymous Twitter accounts, then the ones with large followings, then the big hitters, the Corbyn supporters who appear on TV debate programmes – the whole weird cottage industry

⁴⁹ <https://isreview.org/issue/100/reflections-our-experience-syria>

⁵⁰ <https://corbynismpostmortem.wordpress.com/2020/01/16/episode-1-transcription/>

⁵¹ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm>

⁵² <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/uk-news/2017/05/28/corbyn-pledges-increased-staffing-levels-at-security-and-intelligence-agencies/>

⁵³ <https://socialistworker.org/2017/07/13/being-honest-about-venezuela>

of faith-based political defensiveness. All working to chisel away at the seriousness of what was happening, to make the people targeted feel that they were somehow in the wrong.⁵⁴

One shorthand for this kind of knee-jerk “defence of the Leader” is “Stan culture”. “Stan” is a term for a deranged, obsessed fan (from an Eminem song), and the nastiest Corbyn and Sanders supporters on social media have sometimes acted like participants in one of the infamous feuds within popular entertainment fan cultures, rather than political activists.

Apart from the issue with the possibility of democratically holding the Leader to account, in a populist movement, real power is wielded by who can get closest to the Leader to influence him in the “right” direction. Thus, we saw a rush by socialists in the UK and the US to get onto the front seats of the Corbyn and Sanders bandwagons; even worse, in the UK, to create the repulsive illusion of a “left-wing Brexit”. It should not be surprising, however, to watch “leaders” of the revolutionary Left set aside their principles to go in this direction. This is in practice how this author has watched the revolutionary movements in Aotearoa/New Zealand work over the last 15 years – tailing popular demands or leaders and giving up political clarity in favour of “influence” over the leaders of centrist or even conservative forces.

The evidence of all the Left-populist movements that gave us so much hope over the last 25 years repeat this sorry story. To an extent, it doesn’t matter whether Hugo Chávez really supported Russian and Chinese imperialism and dictators like Mugabe or Lukashenko; whether Jeremy Corbyn really thought Russia were on the right side in Syria, or whether anti-Semitism in the Labour Party was no big deal; or whether Bernie Sanders agreed with a “class reductionist” approach that ignored Black Lives Matter and similar movements in favour of cultivating white populist reactionaries like Joe Rogan. But a decisive number of important people around them certainly did, and were able to act in the name of The Leader – names like Milne or Murray in Britain, David Sirota or Brianna Joy Gray in the US, or Diosdado Cabello in Venezuela.

Philadelphia antifascist Gwen Snyder argues, with respect to Sanders and the “dirtbag left”:

his campaign staff urged him to lean into it. It wasn’t his base, he had much broader appeal. He just had exactly the wrong people whispering in his ear and encouraging him to play to exactly the wrong audience, an audience that reviled the rest of his coalition.⁵⁵

The problems of populism 2: Red-Brown confusion

Although far from a communist horizon, strong-state social democracy might still sound like an improvement for most people compared to corporate-led global neoliberalism, let alone authoritarian Right-wing populism. But the more serious problem is that Left-populism – with its majoritarian, “we are the 99%” rhetoric, based on a division between the people and the Establishment/ the elites – has in practice reproduced the one-sided opposition to liberals/neoliberals/centrism which I discussed in my 2016 article *Against Conservative Leftism*.⁵⁶ This has opened the door to *de facto* or even explicit alliances with Right-populists or even fascists against neoliberal globalism.

One particular subset of the Left-populist movements – commonly known as the “Dirtbag Left” in the United States, to use the self-description of the podcast *Chapo Trap House* – argue that the Trump electorate can be won to social democracy by *class reductionism* – restricting the movement to solely “bread-and-butter” economic demands for higher wages and social welfare, completely rejecting questions of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity and immigration as “divisive” or even “neoliberal”.

The argument seems to be that Donald Trump’s mass support is open to being converted to a social-democratic or even socialist platform, as long as it does not evoke the dreaded “Identity Politics”. Racism, misogyny, homophobia and transphobia do not need to be confronted separately, in this light – in fact, they should not be, as doing so would alienate “the white working class” (read: white men with a “blue-collar” cultural identity) from socialist politics. Bernie Sanders, according to this analysis,

⁵⁴ <https://www.politics.co.uk/blogs/2020/06/26/week-in-review-labour-returns-to-its-anti-racist-roots>

⁵⁵ <https://twitter.com/gwensnyderPHL/status/1294068877522014208>

⁵⁶ <https://fightback.org.nz/2016/02/15/against-conservative-leftism/>

gave *too much away* to “IdPol”. Ironically, this runs directly against Laclau and Mouffe’s proposals for Left-populism; this does not involve unifying disparate groups and integrating their demands under the common banner of “the People”, but one (privileged) part of “the People” *imposing dominance* over the rest. As one Twitter user put it, “they would sell out every POC and every LGBT+ person to not pay college loans”.⁵⁷

This is often accompanied by an assertion that Trump ran to the “left” of Clinton in 2016, in particular that he promised to end foreign wars. If this were true, then a Trump pivot to anti-imperialism and social-democratic economics would make as much sense as anything. But in fact, Trump did precisely the opposite, demanding that the US commit even more vicious war crimes, such as murdering the families of “terrorists”.⁵⁸ A similar assertion is that many people who voted for Trump over Clinton in 2016 did so for the same reasons that Leftists opposed Clinton: her responsibility for neoliberalism, austerity and imperialist wars. This is often combined with an assertion that Trump’s support base are “white working class” – precisely the kind of constituency that a Left-populist movement would dream of mobilizing.



sabrina4bernie #Exit Polls Show Fra... ▾
@sabrina68

Trump has always been to the left of the warmongering neolibs who currently run the Dem Party ..

- 49m

I been sayin it and here you go:
Trump will move to the left of the D's to save his hide. Doesn't mean he believes it or will actually do anything he says (all politicians) but he will say it - just like he did in 2016. Th...

12:12 PM · 6/22/20 · Twitter Web App

In reality, even if Donald Trump is not a literal fascist, he is at the very least “fash-curious”. He has built a movement (almost a cult) out of open expression of white privilege and resentment. His target audience is not the working classes or the oppressed, but the downwardly mobile, formerly privileged (overwhelmingly white and male) middle-classes and skilled workers. These are the layers who have been atomised and dispersed by neoliberal capitalism, and have lost some of their relative privilege over various layers whom they see as “beneath them” (blacks, Muslims, migrants, uppity women, queer and trans people). They direct their resentment towards the latter, while continuing their hero-worship of the billionaire class who have grown fat off their suffering.⁵⁹

All the evidence points to Trump’s voters being much more motivated by racism, misogyny, and 25 years of Right-led conspiracy theory which has sought to convict Hillary Clinton of corruption, murder, and literally sacrificing children to the Devil. All analyses of Trump’s support show that it skews very heavily towards wealthier white (male) voters; though 52% of white women voters plumped for Trump in 2016, recent evidence suggests that this has plummeted, rendering the misogyny of the Trump movement even more stark.⁶⁰ Even worse, the same is true of the Bernie Sanders vote from 2016: as left-wing pollster Sean McElwee put it, “the white working-class voters that Sanders won were mostly anti-Clinton voters”.⁶¹ As David Atkins puts it, the evidence of the Sanders campaign shows that “unlike leftist policy more broadly, this theory of the electorate *has* utterly failed.”⁶²

Similar confusion was apparent among Left-populists who wishfully declared that the 2016 vote for Brexit was “a multi-ethnic working class uprising against

One example of “Trump is the lesser evil” rhetoric. Whether sincerely held or a Trumpist making mischief, this kind of talk is dangerous.

⁵⁷ <https://twitter.com/NickRup/status/1278128227274371072>

⁵⁸ <https://www.mediamatters.org/donald-trump/myth-donald-dove-shows-perils-gullible-press>

⁵⁹ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/anti-establishment-americas-new-syphilitic-politics-of-the-far-left-and-alt-right>

⁶⁰ <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-06-26/behind-trumps-sharp-slump-white-women-who-stuck-with-him-before-are-abandoning-him-now>

⁶¹ <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2020/4/10/21214970/bernie-sanders-2020-lost-class-socialism>

⁶² <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2020/04/11/leftist-policy-didnt-lose-marxist-electoral-theory-did/>

the elites". In fact – as for a Trump vote – the best predictor of a Brexit vote was being white.⁶³ This shows an incapacity of the existing Left-populist movement to tell the difference between radical and reactionary opposition to the status quo. If the Revolution only means "the masses in motion", then any mass movement with a popular leadership which threatens the neoliberal establishment (from Left or Right) is an opportunity rather than a threat.

Rather than building a different power bloc among the excluded masses with its own programme, as Laclau and Mouffe suggest, this kind of "populism" skips over class analysis (which would involve an up-to-date analysis of how the contemporary globalised neoliberal economy works, where value is being produced, etc), in favour of drawing a dividing line between "the elite and the masses" based on *cultural* features. "The people", in this kind of "Left Populism", are all those who do not share the cultural signifiers of the upwardly-mobile middle class; or alternatively, display the cultural features of the manual working class which existed before the neoliberal era began. This is a conservative, even traditionalist, understanding of politics, which benefits from the prevailing drift to the radical Right, rather than opposing it.

Even worse, this envy of the success of Right-wing populism creates an irresistible temptation to "join them if you can't beat them". As opposed to a "horizontal" form of building a mass movement, which would ally all the oppressed and exploited on the basis of solidarity, it seems that Left-wing populism seeks to combat its Right-wing equivalent by appealing to the same base – downwardly mobile formerly privileged layers (particularly white, blue-collar men) who have lost out in the era of globalised neoliberalism.

This confusion of Left-wing and Right-wing oppositions to globalised neoliberalism opens the door to the embrace by a Left-populist movement of socially conservative and "campist" politics, even fascist-infected Red-Brown politics. Alongside this often comes a defence of authoritarian nationalist regimes which are (supposedly) opposed to US imperialism, such as Russia, China and Syria. A tell-

tale sign of this kind of Red-Brown populism in the US is adamant insistence that the investigation into Russian state collusion with the 2016 Trump campaign is some kind of hoax. Well-known promoters of this kind of politics include American-Brazilian journalist Glenn Greenwald and Irish writer Angela Nagle, who have actually appeared on the show of extreme-Right FOX News host Tucker Carlson to agree with him about the horrors of neoliberalism and identity politics.

Lebanese activist and journalist Joey Ayoub puts it colourfully and succinctly:

if the 'populist left' has common grounds with fascism the 'populist left' can fuck right off and there's absolutely no reason to waste any time listening to three white people debating whether common ground can be found with those who want to erase our existence.⁶⁴

The problems of populism 3: Trump Envy

The role of a kind of *resentment*, or even sadism, in populist politics of both Left and Right is vital here. It's no coincidence that many people who promote these kinds of politics have previously expressed the wish for a "tough guy socialism", which, to misuse an old expression of Trotsky, "really wants to tear the bourgeoisie's head off". The British socialist writer Richard Seymour, now an editor of *Salvage* magazine, used to talk on his blog *Lenin's Tomb* about how Corbyn was too "nice" and he needed supporters who would leverage "hate" and even "sadism" against the conservative Right and neoliberal centre.⁶⁵

It might even be said that modern Left populism suffers from "Trump Envy". Quite apart from the need pointed out by Laclau to have a leader-figure as a binding force for a populist coalition, many Left-wing activists have the desire for someone in this role who will be just as rude, aggressive, abusive and transgressive as Donald Trump but for "good purposes", "from the Left". If a mass movement against the neoliberal establishment is what is required – never mind its politics or its class composition – it's easy to imagine that supporters of

⁶³ <https://fightback.org.nz/2017/10/17/winning-with-conservative-leftism-jeremy-corbyn-and-brexit/>; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0176268018301320>

⁶⁴ <https://twitter.com/joeyayoub/status/1276194859167121408>

⁶⁵ <http://www.leninology.co.uk/2015/06/yes-you-can-hate-rich.html>; <http://www.leninology.co.uk/2016/06/in-praise-of-hate.html>

the Trump movement (or the Brexit movement, or similar manifestations in other countries) could be turned “to our side”, if they were offered the same aggressive macho leadership but with a different programme.

Left-populism shares with its Right-wing sibling a certain joy in transgression, in (at least verbal) violence – which tracks with what Laclau says in *On Populist Reason* about the vital role played by emotions, rather than strictly rational analysis, in cohering a populist bloc (Kindle location 1925). The Black Lives Matter uprisings show that retaliatory aggression and violence against the oppressor class are a part of any vital mass movement. However, the real problem comes when this aggression is directed *horizontally* – or even “downward”, towards a social layer which the movement considers “beneath” it. This goes beyond intemperate attacks on centrist Democrats and the neoliberal establishment, and even the usual excesses of intra-movement conflict, to become a kind of half-spoken political strategy, of abuse as a *feature* of the movement, a “perk” of belonging.

As explored above, factions of the Corbyn and Sanders movements in the US and the UK went down the path of Conservative Leftism in rejecting “intersectionality” as a neoliberal piety – and this has combined with the pleasure in transgression or sadism mentioned above, to emerge as racist, misogynistic, homophobic or transphobic abuse, justified as being “from the Left” when delivered against acceptable targets. For example, Gwen Snyder, a strong supporter of the Sanders campaign, became the target of sustained harassment (escalating to death threats) for pointing out issues of misogynist behaviour within Bernie fandom, and the Red-Brown drift among fans of “Dirtbag Left” podcasts.⁶⁶ The Bernie Sanders campaign itself (not Sanders himself) proudly touted an endorsement from Joe Rogan, a pop-culture podcaster who is flamboyantly transphobic and otherwise bigoted.⁶⁷

Another curious phenomenon is people who hold much better Left politics than the “Dirtbags”, even though they quite rightly despise Trump and almost everything he stands for, *defending Trump*, or at least seeing him as a lesser evil, against “the

Establishment/elites”. For example, they agree with Trump that he is being unfairly attacked by a “Deep State”; law enforcement, military and intelligence personnel and other people within the US state who are opposed, not so much to Trump’s politics, but to his disregard for the norms and conventions of the US bourgeois state, or even its laws and Constitution – something that many Left-populists regard as a *positive* feature, if only he would use it “for good”.

This is amplified by the way in which, as mentioned above, the US activist Left has concentrated over the years on attacking liberals, neoliberals, and “the Dems” as its first priority. And who is better at really “triggering the libs” than Trump? Disturbingly, and as in 2016, many Left-wing figures attack the Democrats in terms which are so similar to those coming from the Trump campaign that it is often impossible to tell the difference; this is the same process that Gwen Snyder identifies whereby the “Dirtbag Left” serves to “launder” fascist memes for a Left-wing audience.⁶⁸

This phenomenon of Left-populism taking a “lesser evil” approach to Right-populism against the neoliberal establishment has become a meme to the point where it now has a name. In the same way that anything that comes after “I’m not racist, but...” is going to be racist, a Leftist who says “Mr Trump, who I do not support...” is about to support Trump against the Deep State or the neoliberal Democratic Party.

These Left populists oppose this putative sabotage, not because they like Trump’s politics, far from it... but because they imagine the State apparatus *doing the same thing to a putative President Sanders* (or on the model of what the Chilean state actually did to Salvador Allende in the 1970s). Similarly, many supporters of Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders have attempted to discredit the mainstream media as irredeemably biased against their candidate, in very similar terms to Trump and his “fake news” slogan – with the same purpose, to discredit any criticism of Dear Leader, whether valid or not. This is a logical consequence of a horizon of victory which envisions a popular Leader taking control of the State machinery “for good purposes”, rather than a popular movement dismantling it.

⁶⁶ See thread beginning at <https://twitter.com/gwensnyderPHL/status/1249712403404783618>

⁶⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dawnstaceynennis/2020/01/26/joe-rogans-endorsement-the-stain-on-bernie-sanders-that-some-voters-think-makes-him-more-attractive/>

⁶⁸ <https://twitter.com/gwensnyderPHL/status/1288588513601040384>

This sneaking sympathy by Leftists for Trump against “neoliberal elites” leads to what can only be described as wish fulfilment fantasies, that Trump may one day “pivot” to the Left, if he sees it in his electoral interests to do so. The Twitter account “Shitty Outflanking Takes” collects arguments from Leftists that Trump will, someday soon, start promoting social-democratic causes such as Medicare for All, forgiving student debt, criminal justice reform, or even ending American overseas military adventures, to “outflank” the neoliberal Democrats and win a working-class base.⁶⁹ If Trump is politically empty – if he just wants power and will say or do anything to get re-elected – and, as much of the US asserts, the “Dems” and the “GOP” are no different – why should Trump *not* adopt the Bernie Sanders programme in total? An interesting reply would be: if that were true, why did Sanders not run as a Republican?

To summarize, we have sketched out three categories of problems with Left-populism in practice. Firstly, there are problems inherent in the populist political method as sketched out by Laclau and Mouffe. Chief among this is the contradiction between a populist leader’s symbolic unifying role and their actual role in strategy and tactics; the fact that the urge to “defend the Leader” might make self-correction in the movement impossible; and the way in which those around the Leader can use their role as his “biggest supporters” to justify atrocious politics.⁷⁰ Both the Corbyn and Sanders campaigns developed a “Stan culture”, targeting centrists or even insufficiently enthusiastic supporters of The Leader as the main enemy.

Secondly: there is also the problem that Left Populism and Right populism are – as Laclau says – the same method used for different ends, and we have seen a steady stream in practice of Leftists who enthusiastically back the former often end up backing the latter because they have lost the ability to tell the difference, or remember why it’s a vital one. There is even the phenomenon of “Dirtbag Leftism” which seeks to throw out the inheritance of 50 years of intersectional struggle in favour of trying to restore a white, male, traditionalist audience for social democracy – which is contrary to what Laclau and Mouffe would see as populism

altogether, and forgets that 1960s social democracy wasn’t so great either, which is why it was rejected by the Beatnik, Hippie and Punk movements.

Thirdly: there is a real problem of *Trump Envy*, the belief that what the movement needs is a “left-wing version” of the Trump phenomenon, or even a hope of Trump “outflanking” the Democrats to the left on economic populism. This includes a distressing number of “Lefties” who delight in the same kind of mob cruelty and aggressive disregard for inconvenient realities which characterise Trump’s and other Right-populist movements.

Laclau’s argument is that a Leader figure who can unify atomised and conflicting social layers in an anti-establishment movement is an essential element in populism. The worst possible form such a movement can take on, of course, is fascism. At best, it can take power in the capitalist state – but historical evidence suggests that, from there, it can only retain power through conciliation with global capitalism and turning on its own supporters. Populist movements have successfully changed the balance of power within class society – but never abolished it. For “post-Marxists” like Laclau and Mouffe, the latter might not even be possible.

Direct action gets the goods

One way out of this problem might be, not to reject the Left populist strategy, but firstly, to recognize it as *necessary but insufficient* to provoke a fundamental change in society; and secondly, to reject primarily *electoral populism* of the Corbyn/Sanders/SYRIZA variety.

Electoral politics usually come after a downturn in the direct-action movements, and vice versa. The failure of Occupy and the Arab Spring gave rise to SYRIZA, PODEMOS, the Corbyn and Sanders movements; the failure or dead-end of these electoral movements has erupted in the current global wave of “Black Lives Matter”/anti-police uprisings. This is similar to how the defeat of the movements of the 1970s, and the election of Right-populists Reagan and Thatcher in the US and UK, was followed by insurgent broad-Left electoral campaigns by Tony Benn, Jesse Jackson and their like.

⁶⁹ <https://twitter.com/mtwidns>

⁷⁰ Those familiar with the theories of Jacques Lacan may recognize the psychoanalytic concept of “The Name of the Father” at work here.

British left academic Harry Pitts argues that the Corbyn movement in the Labour Party was in fact

the legacy of the anti-austerity social movements after the crisis. Their ultimate failure, I guess, you know, and their fragmentation, the turn of a lot of the people involved in that towards a more electoralist parliamentary route.⁷¹

In majoritarian (first-past-the-post) systems like the United States or the United Kingdom, Left-wing electoral populism can only act as a “spoiler”, attempting to take away enough votes from the more liberal of the major parties to be able to dictate terms upon it; unless, of course, it succeeds in taking over the liberal/centre-Left major party from within. The former is grossly irresponsible when the Right no longer wants a nastier version of capitalist normality, but the mass repeal of democratic rights and the welfare state in a fascist or Pinochet-style programme. As *Fightback* has argued repeatedly, this is the same fatal mistake made by the Stalinised Communists of the 1930s who saw no difference between Hitler and capitalist normality.

clara pluton @clarapluton · 1m
Replying to @daphlawless @hoodqueer and @libcomorg
Joe Biden is a fascist 🤦 he is evil. There is a contradiction when you say you want to work against fascism then at the same time invest in the systems that created it.

That same mistake being made in real time on social media

The latter runs up against the logical problem of how to successfully dominate a party mostly composed of people you despise. The *Chapo* “bend the knee” slogan would never have worked in practice for Bernie Sanders inside the US Democrats, just as the Labour Party caucus and apparatus never “bent the knee” to Jeremy Corbyn – which is of course exactly what Corbyn’s die-hard supporters complain about. The alternative – to purge the liberals and moderates from the party – does not seem a plausible step forward to winning electoral contests. The failure mode of both these approaches is the electoral nihilism condemned above; of asserting that neoliberal capitalist normality is no different than fascism, that it won’t be allowed to win anyway, that electoral politics are a waste of time if “Our Guy” isn’t on the ballot.

The lessons of Chávez in Venezuela and SYRIZA in Greece show that when a Left-populist movement seizes state power and confronts international capitalism, there is a period of stalemate followed by slow but inevitable capitulation. Come to think of it, this is also the legacy of Stalinism. My personal suggestion would be to concentrate on building a real Left-populist movement for protagonistic, intersectional democracy – while fully embracing a vote for “our preferred enemy” in elections. The question is whether we would prefer to be on the streets in 2021 demanding social reforms and police abolition from President Biden, or defending the remnants of freedom of speech and assembly from an emboldened President Trump and fascist mobs.

This is of course the dreaded “lesser (or least) evil” strategy, as criticised (though not rejected) by Hal Draper.⁷² But anyone who argues that it is possible for a party or candidate to actually win a bourgeois election contest while not becoming *some* form of evil – that is, without making compromises with capital and social layers which support it – can be charitably advised to “get real”. Encouraging people to believe that voting for a Left-wing social democratic politician is actually “The Revolution” – the “Bernie in a Ché hat” phenomenon – while demonizing other centrist or reformist candidates and tendencies, means – once the compromises begin – setting up the movement for massive disappointment, abstention from the fight against fascist, or even drifting in a Trumpist or fascist direction, fuelled by hatred of “liberals/moderates” above all else.

In any case, as we’ve seen above, voting is secondary in terms of social transformation, or even a “consolation prize” once mass direct-action or protest movements fail. It seems strange that Corbyn or Sanders supporters should depict their leaders in the same terms as Communist revolutionaries, breathing fire on the hated “liberals” all the time, while at the same time placing their hopes for social change on winning elections in the bourgeois state. In fact, Gwen Snyder argues that an approach that prioritises direct action might have spin-off benefits for electoral work:

centering direct action organizing is more productive than centering electoral work when it

⁷¹ <https://corbynismpostmortem.wordpress.com/2020/02/28/episode-7-transcription/>

⁷² <https://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1967/01/lesser.htm>

comes to focusing our energies. Direct action changes minds and wins hearts and makes people realize their power. When people's hearts & minds are changed, when folks realize that their action makes a difference and that they hold real power when organized, they're much more likely to be open to coalition-building around a candidate with bolder positions when it comes time to talk elections.⁷³

We might counterpose to electoral populism the concept of *protagonistic democracy* – a situation where working people take matters into their own hands to create a better world. Such a form of direct-action populism would necessarily require its unifying slogans and its (symbolic and practical) leadership to reflect *intersectional* politics – identifying and building commonalities between different axes of oppression, rather than privileging one part of the coalition above others. The “conservative Left” strategies discussed above, which centre the “traditional” (white, cis het, male) working class as the face of struggle, offer no path forward but the netherworld of Red-Brown reaction.

The Occupy movement and the Arab Spring, not to mention the current “Black Lives Matter” uprisings in the United States,⁷⁴ give us recent examples of direct-action populist movements. Syria’s democratic movement gives examples of the kind of unifying slogans which make connections rather than fudge differences – ‘Syria is one’ sought to counter sectarianism by assembling a people under the signifier of free Syria, combined with the transnational slogan ‘the people demand the fall of the regime’ (which has re-emerged in BLM protests). In contrast, while the Arab Spring was drowned in blood, Occupy reached its own dead end due to a confused political project whose slogan (“We are the 99%”) and practice did not draw sharp lines against conspiracy theories, misogyny and even fascism. The latter is, as we’ve seen above, a danger inherent in the populist method which must be strongly

guarded against; which suggests a vital role for anti-capitalist political centres within such movements.

As this article is written, the BLM movement has quickly overtaken the Bernie Sanders phenomenon politically and is enacting a form of protagonistic democracy on the streets, under the violent repression of Trump’s fash-curious USA. It has gone far beyond the original coalition between Black communities acting in self-defence and white radicals; the white “moms and dads” who stood against Trump’s snatch squads in Portland in late July are a sign of a populist movement which is really taking off. Meanwhile, Bernie Sanders himself is united with his apparent polar opposites, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, in making verbal gestures of support for the movement, while refusing the demand to “Defund the Police” (let alone abolish it). Some of the dead-end “anti-liberal” Left have been reduced to repeating lukewarm versions of Trump’s slurs against Joe Biden, or fantasies about Trump “outflanking” the Democrats. American journalist Josh Messite comments on this inability to realise when they’ve lost:

if Bernie and Corbyn both achieved massive electoral wins and enacted sweeping reforms, I would have had to shift my thinking on organizing priorities and the path to power. instead Bernie and Corbyn both lost, and yet the people who pushed for that strategy haven’t changed a bit.⁷⁵

Just recently, a major left-wing blog in Ireland ran an appeal for a new electoral coalition between the various socialist factions.⁷⁶ Left-populism has its dangers and has not yet fulfilled its promise, though I am not willing to agree that it was a mistake altogether. My argument, though, is that a primarily *electoral* Left-populism has proved itself to be a comprehensive dead-end.

⁷³ <https://twitter.com/gwensnyderPHL/status/1288144108431773696>. The importance of direct mass action in changing mass consciousness – rather than leaving it to elected politicians or professional organisers – was also raised by US union organiser Jane McAlevey in *No Shortcuts*, a book I reviewed in *Fightback* last year: <https://fightback.org.nz/2020/01/13/book-review-no-shortcuts/>

⁷⁴ Some wags have dubbed it the “ACAB Spring” (All Cops Are Bastards).

⁷⁵ <https://twitter.com/JoshMessite/status/1276318659984703489>

⁷⁶ <https://cedarlounge.wordpress.com/2020/07/09/the-old-world-is-dying-and-the-new-world-struggles-to-be-born-call-the-midwife-ireland-needs-a-new-left-party/>

“Lawmakers, not lawbreakers”: Jacindamania as a bastion of the Third Way

By ANI WHITE

For progressives around the world, Jacinda Ardern’s Fifth Labour government is seen as a bastion. However, this perceived beacon of light is in large part an index of the darkness that has taken hold internationally. In a world where a man like Donald Trump can hold the presidency, the bar is low enough for a minimally competent leader and government to appear exceptional.

It’s also obviously the case that Ardern’s Labour is preferable to the opposition National Party, especially with Judith Collins taking over leadership from the right of the party. To quote Marxist Hal Draper’s classic text on lesser evilism:

What the classic case [Hitler vs von Hindenburg in the 1932 German presidential election] teaches is not that the Lesser Evil is the same as the Greater Evil – this is just as nonsensical as the liberals argue it to be but rather this: that you can’t fight the victory of the rightmost forces by sacrificing your own independent strength to support elements just the next step away from them.⁷⁷

Ardern’s personality is undoubtedly a factor in her appeal, as indicated by the term ‘Jacindamania.’ Yet politically, Ardern represents a form of centrist politics that has failed to address the challenges of our time. Early in her political career, Ardern worked for Tony Blair’s Cabinet Office, and this set the tone for her career. Ardern names her favourite election as the 2005 re-election of the Fifth Labour government, while also naming the 2008 election of Obama as a highlight.⁷⁸ Her government echoes the Third Way philosophy that predominated 20 years ago, but has gone into decline with the rise of right-wing populism. Although Third Way politics may be

preferable to Trumpism, this is a low bar – it remains grossly inadequate to address contemporary challenges such as climate change and inequality.

This article will focus on how the coalition government has handled four key issues: climate change (with the Zero Carbon Act), indigenous sovereignty (particularly the Ihumātao struggle), welfare, and the March 15th Christchurch terrorist attack.

Zero Carbon Act

In November 2019, the Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Amendment Act, or simply Zero Carbon Act passed with near-unanimous support. This established a new Climate Change Commission, a quasi-independent advisory body. Although hailed as a ‘historic achievement’, the Act was fundamentally compromised.

The coalition government could have passed this bill alone, yet decided to seek bipartisan consensus. The opposition National Party successfully demanded many changes to the bill. This was reminiscent of the Obama government seeking a bipartisan consensus on healthcare, despite having a majority at the time.

The resulting Act was as compromised as you’d expect from a process that actively sought the input of forces hostile to meaningful change. Methane targets were unchanged, binding legal deterrents were not imposed, the date for the emissions target stayed the same, no explicit commitment was made to divest from oil and gas, and key industries were exempted.⁷⁹ The apparently positive changes – tighter regulation of carbon offsetting, and of offshore mitigation – embedded the ‘emissions

⁷⁷ Hal Draper, “Who’s going to be the lesser-evil in 1968?”, January 1967, Marxists Internet Archive: tinyurl.com/lesser-evil

⁷⁸ Adam Dudding, “Jacinda Ardern: I didn’t want to work for Tony Blair”, 27 August 2017, *Stuff*: tinyurl.com/jacinda-blair

⁷⁹ Josie Adams, “How much did they listen? Here’s what just happened to the Zero Carbon Bill”, 24 October 2019, *The Spinoff*: tinyurl.com/labour-zerocarbon

trading' approach to climate policy, which has created a new market and had little-to-no impact on emissions. Additionally, the new commission is entirely an advisory body, without teeth. Nothing is binding.

Ultimately, the Zero Carbon Act was a symbolic commitment, by a government unwilling to pursue the kind of confrontation with extractive capital which is necessary to prevent the impending climate catastrophe.

Ihumātao

The struggle over Ihumātao is a perfect example of Jacinda Ardern's fence-sitting on contentious issues. Ihumātao is a site of historic significance for Māori, which was confiscated in 1863, and purchased by Fletcher Building to construct private housing in 2014. Fletcher Building's purchasing of the land set off a struggle by local Māori to reclaim Ihumātao, which escalated into a mass struggle in mid-2019, as protestors clashed with police.

The government has been slow to intervene, initially taking the stance that the matter should be privately resolved, then moving to compensate Fletchers after significant public pressure. Rumours indicate that Fletchers will be compensated at a greater rate than they purchased the land for, allowing them to still profit from attempting to expropriate Māori land. Ardern refused to comment on reports of a potential loan of around \$40 million for Auckland Council to purchase the land.⁸⁰

Ihumātao activists made the moderate demand that Ardern simply visit the site. In August 2019, around 300 people participated in a hikoi (march) to Ardern's office to deliver a petition with 26,000 signatures demanding Ardern visit the site. Despite advance notice, Ardern was not present to receive the petition.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Michael Neilson, "Ihumātao: Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern refuses to discuss speculation of Government loan", 28 January 2020, *NZ Herald*: tinyurl.com/jacinda-40m

⁸¹ Murphy, "Recap: Hīkoi from Ihumātao to PM's office", 22 August 2019, Radio New Zealand: tinyurl.com/jacinda-petition

⁸² Scott Palmer, "We will be there: Jacinda Ardern speaks out at Ihumātao", 20 August 2019, *Newshub*: tinyurl.com/jacinda-hides

⁸³ Radio New Zealand, "Jacinda Ardern 'will visit Ihumātao ... it's just a matter of timing'", 23 August 2019, Radio New Zealand: tinyurl.com/jacinda-visit

⁸⁴ Dan Satherly, "'You can't condone lawbreaking' – Jacinda Ardern to Metiria Turei", 28 July 2017, *Newshub*: tinyurl.com/ardern-lawbreaking

Ardern's statements on the topic have been fuzzy and ill-defined. In August 2019, she commented: "On issues like Ihumātao, the difficult issues, the hard issues, we will be there, we are there in those conversations." This fairly empty phrase came after months of refusing to take any explicit position on the issue. Iwi leader Che Wilson criticised Ardern's lack of action or political commitment: "You asked us to keep you to account at Waitangi this year. But every big issue with regard to Māori, it appears that you hide away."⁸²

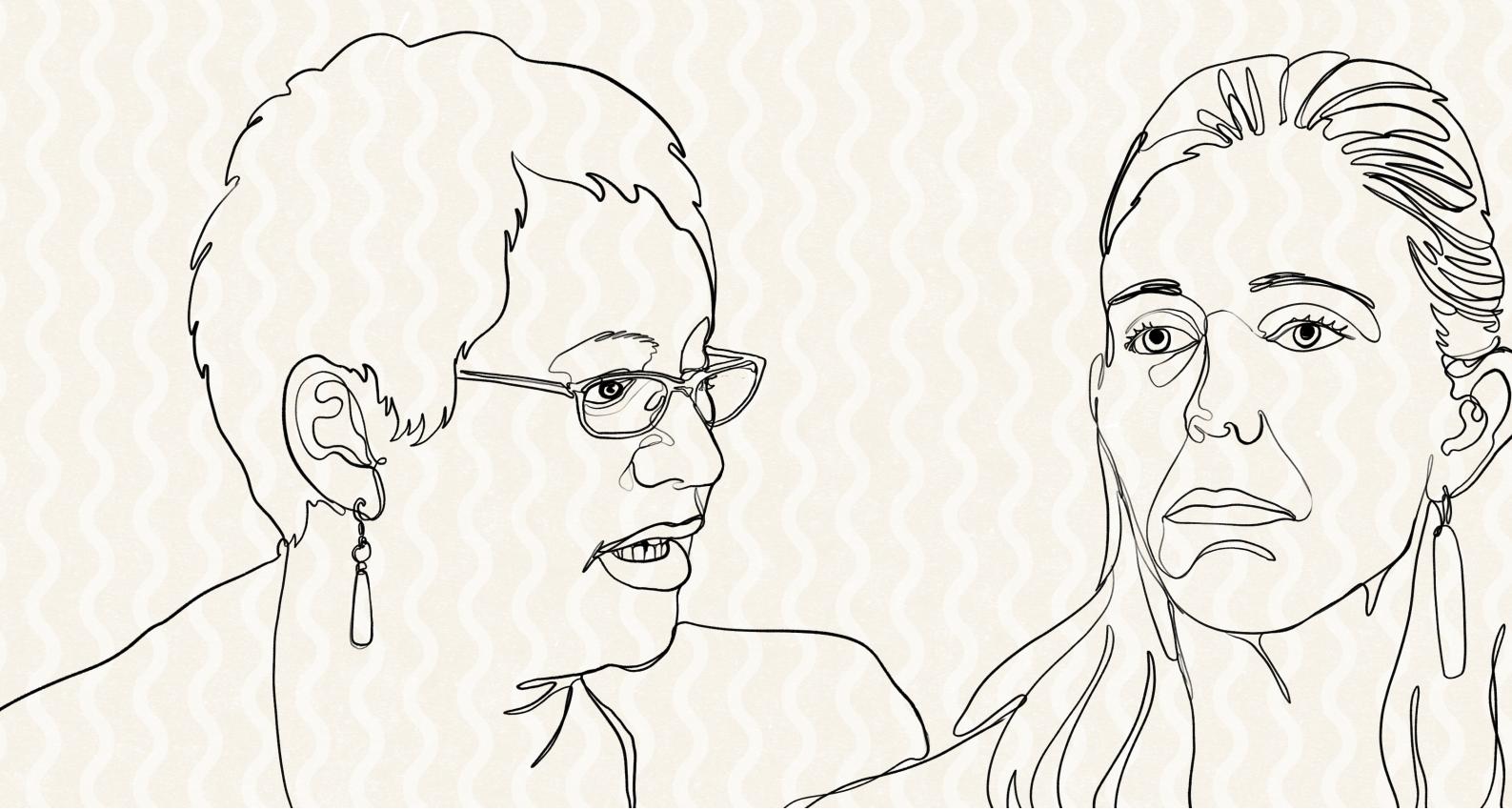
Ardern has said she will not visit Ihumātao until the struggle has reached a resolution.⁸³ Negotiations are ongoing.

Welfare

In the 2017 General Election, Green co-leader Metiria Turei admitted that as a single mother on a benefit, she had lied to Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) to get additional money to cover expenses. This set off a vicious right-wing smear campaign that resulted in Turei stepping down. Ardern's response reinforced the smear campaign: "When you're lawmakers, you can't condone lawbreaking."⁸⁴ This set the tone for her government's welfare policies.

In a press release in response to the Ardern government's 2020 budget, welfare advocacy group Auckland Action Against Poverty said the following:

The Government's 2020 well-being budget continues to fail low-income people, families and communities with the lack of investment in support for people receiving benefits. It contains no additional increases to core benefits outside of the indexation changes and we keep condemning hundreds of thousands of people to live below the poverty line.



People should not have to rely on charities or food grants to survive. The \$25 increase to benefit levels earlier this year has not reduced the need for food grants from Work and Income. The increased pressure on Work and Income staff because of rising unemployment due to Covid-19 will make it more difficult for people to access hardship assistance.

The Ministry of Social Development is preparing for up to an extra 300,000 people to apply for a benefit in the coming months which means a huge proportion of our population will be living in poverty. The Government could alleviate the pressure on low-income communities as well as Work and Income by lifting benefits to liveable levels and let Work and Income staff focus on pastoral support, instead of processing food grants.

We are living in unprecedented times, which we know requires a response which is unprecedented. Too many families have been living in poverty for decades, and this budget further ignores the systemic changes required to change that for communities.

While people's employment status shouldn't determine their right to a life with dignity, we are worried that there are no guarantees by Government to ensure jobs created as part of this budget provide a living wage and decent working conditions. People should not be forced

into employment that does not allow them to make ends meet.

We welcome the investment into Māori housing initiatives such as He Kūkū Ki Te Kāinga and He Taupua, but the bulk of the funding pales in comparison to community housing and transitional housing initiatives. We are calling on the Government to direct more funding into hapu and iwi led housing initiatives and return confiscated Crown land.

Despite the additional funding in public housing, the Government is accepting it will not be able to house all of the people on the social housing waiting list over the next few years. The additional funding for state homes won't cover the burgeoning state housing waiting list, meaning families will still be homeless or struggling to make ends meet in private rentals.

We are disappointed no changes have been made to our tax system. This was an opportunity to introduce taxes on wealth and speculative transactions so that the wealthy few pay their fair share and the tax burden does not fall on low-income communities in the form of regressive taxes.

The Government has the resources to ensure that everybody has enough food on the table, access to housing, and public services. Given the circumstances of Covid-19 and against the backdrop of the climate crisis, this was an

opportunity for us to be courageous and truly transformative as a way forward for all of us.⁸⁵

The government's decision to increase the benefits of the newly unemployed, while keeping those on existing benefits below the poverty line, was also condemned by AAAP as creating a two-tier welfare system.⁸⁶

March 15th 2019 Christchurch terror attack

Jacinda Ardern was praised internationally for her response to the Christchurch terror attack, in which a far right gunman killed 50 people at two mosques. Prior to that point, New Zealand governments were complacent about the far right. In the wake of 9/11, the Fifth Labour government oversaw an expansion of 'anti-terrorist' powers that surveilled everyone but the far right – particularly Māori, leftists, Muslims, animal rights groups, and environmentalists.⁸⁷

In the wake of the attack, many praised Ardern's compassion, and images of her wearing a headscarf at the funeral for the victims became internationally iconic. Yet this is another sign of how low the bar is internationally for political leaders – simply respecting customs at a funeral is now worthy of praise. It's also indicative of the way praise for Ardern has often centred on personality rather than policy.

Ardern's government passed gun control legislation in the wake of the massacre – but also armed the

police. Immediately after the attack, armed police became routinely visible.⁸⁸ The government then launched an official trial of armed police from October 2019 to April 2020. Māori and criminal justice advocates criticised this: even prior to the trial, two thirds of those shot by police were Māori and Pacific peoples, and Māori were not consulted.⁸⁹ Police shootings quickly became a regular occurrence, and three officers were charged with homicide.⁹⁰ The trial ended as a result of public pressure,⁹¹ which amplified as the US Black Lives Matter movement triggered thousands to march against racism and police violence in Aotearoa/New Zealand.⁹²

As with COVID-19, the fact that the government's initial response to the attack involved increasing police powers indicates their ultimate class allegiance.

Conclusion

Ardern's Labour Government is a competent manager of capitalism. Yet on policy issues, the government is defined by half-measures and empty symbolic commitments. For better or worse, Aotearoa/New Zealand is a bastion of centrist stability in a polarising world.

⁸⁵ AAAP, "The Government's 2020 Well-being Budget Continues To Fail Our Unemployed", 14 May 2020, *Scoop*: tinyurl.com/aaap-2020budget

⁸⁶ AAAP, "Govt Income Relief Payment Creating Two-tiers Of Unemployed", 25 May 2020, *Scoop*: tinyurl.com/aaap-twotier

⁸⁷ Eleanor Ainge Roy and Michael McGowan, "New Zealand asks: how was the threat from the far right missed?" 20 March 2019, *The Guardian*: tinyurl.com/far-right-threat-nz

⁸⁸ Lana Hart, "There's no justification for police having guns after March 15", 24 February 2020, *Stuff*: tinyurl.com/armed-police

⁸⁹ Michael Neilson, Armed Response Teams trial: Police warned not consulting Māori could have 'severe' consequence, 29 May 2020, *NZ Herald*: tinyurl.com/trial-racism

⁹⁰ People Against Prisons Aotearoa, "Police Homicide Confirms Fears Of Armed Police Patrols", 2 June 2020, *Scoop*: tinyurl.com/police-homicide

⁹¹ Phil Taylor, "New Zealand drops armed police trial after public concern", 9 June 2020, *The Guardian*: tinyurl.com/trial-ends

⁹² Radio New Zealand, "Thousands of NZers march for Black Lives Matter", 14 June 2020, Radio New Zealand: tinyurl.com/blm-nz

Being kind? The Ardern government and COVID-19

By BRONWEN BEECHEY

Aotearoa New Zealand, and particularly its Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, has been widely praised in the media for its response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government announced a state of emergency and Alert Level Four – the highest on the COVID-19 alert system – on March 24, meaning that the country's borders were closed to all but returning citizens, who are quarantined on arrival; schools and all non-essential businesses closed; and all workers other than those in essential services were required to work at home if possible. People were only able to leave home for essential trips (such as to supermarkets) or short walks.

The government's "go hard, go early" strategy paid off in its aim of "flattening the curve" – ensuring that the coronavirus didn't take hold in numbers that would overwhelm the health system. By the time the government announced that the country was moving to alert Level One on June 8, the total number of coronavirus cases stood at 1,504 with 22 deaths. All of the deaths were people over 60 with underlying health conditions, and linked to identified "clusters", without any widespread community outbreaks. Up until August, the numbers of cases increased by only 64, all of those in returning New Zealanders who were in managed isolation.

The government's strategy was effective in its messaging, explaining the science behind the strategy in relatable terms, popularising concepts like "bubbles" (a household or group within which people isolate, to avoid spreading the virus), urging people to "be kind" and stressing collectivity with terms like "the team of 5 million" (Aotearoa New Zealand's population). Although police were given powers to enforce lockdown rules, the numbers of those deliberately breaking them were low. Obviously in a country made up of islands, and with a small population, the ability to keep COVID-19 numbers low was easier. But the basis for popular support for the lockdown was that the government made it clear that it valued the health of its people over calls to prioritise the economy.

Much of the praise of Ardern and the government is justified, although it has to be said that compared to the performance of other leaders such as Scott Morrison, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, any reasonably competent response to the pandemic would look good. However, there are equally justifiable criticisms of the government response to COVID-19, the main one being that the existing deep inequalities in society are at least being maintained, and at worst being deepened.

These inequalities have existed since the colonisation of Aotearoa, despite popular beliefs that Aotearoa New Zealand is a bastion of equality. Despite the assurances of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) of 1840 that Māori would maintain their land and culture, Māori were systematically dispossessed of both, and despite long-standing resistance are still over-represented in statistics of poverty, ill-health and other indicators of deprivation. The British colonists imported a class system which was also able to use racism to allow Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) a relatively comfortable standard of living.

In the 1980s, the Labour government headed by David Lange adopted a neoliberal agenda, inspired by those of Thatcher and Reagan. Known as "Rogernomics" after its leading proponent, Finance Minister Roger Douglas, wide-ranging cuts were made to public services, government entities were privatised and workers' rights attacked. These economically conservative measures were accompanied by social reforms, such as legalisation of homosexuality and the ban on nuclear-powered ships. The National Party government elected in 1990 continued these neoliberal policies and also slashed social welfare benefits and introduced fees for healthcare and tertiary education. The combination of neoliberal economic and socially progressive policies has continued since. As a result, New Zealand's economy has depended on low wages and even lower benefits, creating a class of working poor that is predominantly made up of Māori, Pacific peoples and new migrants.

The government's response to COVID-19 included a \$12 billion package to support the economy, over half of which went to a wage subsidy scheme aimed at allowing COVID-19-affected businesses to retain staff. Under the scheme, eligible full-time workers receive up to \$585 per week for 12 weeks, paid as a lump sum. However, the subsidy is paid to the employer to pass on to workers and a number of employers simply pocketed the subsidy for themselves. Other large companies, such as Air New Zealand, took the wage subsidy then made staff redundant anyway. Even if workers received the wage subsidy, the reduction in income meant that those on low wages struggled to meet rent or mortgage repayments and feed their families. Over the course of the lockdown, food banks reported demand soaring by up to 200 per cent.

Beneficiaries received an increase of \$25 per week, which was not enough to bring them up to an adequate level. The government also introduced a higher rate of benefits for those who were made redundant due to COVID-19, a move widely criticised as creating a two-tier benefit system and reinforcing an ideology distinguishing the "deserving poor" from "bludgers". As increasing numbers of New Zealanders returned from living overseas, and were quarantined at the expense of the government, a campaign led by the opposition National Party demanded that people returning to Aotearoa New Zealand pay for their stay in managed isolation. The government caved under pressure and initiated a managed isolation fee of \$3,100 for an adult entering Aotearoa New Zealand for less than 90 days, with additional charges for extra adults and children over 3. The fee will also apply to temporary visa holders and any essential workers entering the country. While there are exemptions for those returning to go into isolation to care for sick relatives, and anyone returning to visit dying or sick relatives or attend funerals can apply for charges to be waived, the fees will make it impossible for those on low wages to return. It has also been suggested that charging Māori in particular to return to the country where they are recognised as the indigenous population is in breach of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Left out of the "team of 5 million" altogether were the approximately 300,000 migrant workers on temporary visas. Many of those workers lost jobs or had their hours substantially reduced, but were unable to apply for benefits. While the Social Security Act has provision for the Government to

authorise the payment of emergency benefits in an epidemic, the Government refused to do so, despite extending temporary visas through the issue of an epidemic notice. Instead, migrants were told to seek help through their countries' consulates, or from Civil Defence Emergency management groups. These could provide only minimal assistance. On June 16, the government announced a \$37.6 million program, delivered by Red Cross, to assist those on temporary visas with basic food and accommodation. However, the refusal of the government to grant emergency benefits despite having the power to do so can hardly be described as kind or compassionate.

Although a reasonable effort was made to house rough sleepers in motels, many families spent the lockdown in overcrowded, cold, damp homes. High rents and decades of neglecting or selling of public housing have created a housing crisis. These conditions help coronavirus and other illnesses to spread. At the time of writing, Aotearoa New Zealand has re-entered partial lockdown, following an outbreak of COVID-19 originating in South Auckland, an area which has a high proportion of Māori, Pacific peoples and migrant families on low incomes or benefits who live in substandard, crowded housing. While inequality continues to exist, these outbreaks are likely to continue.

The success of the government's COVID-19 strategy was not just because of its messaging and calls to "be kind", but because ordinary people took action to look out for their neighbours, help distribute food parcels, do shopping for those unable to leave home, or just stayed home in their "bubble" and stopped the virus from spreading. There was also proactive action from a number of remote Māori communities who set up roadblocks to ensure that the virus did not get brought into their areas. Of course, many essential workers including health workers, aged carers, supermarket workers, warehouse workers, courier drivers and others are on low wages and struggling to pay rents and mortgages. While it seems likely that Labour will win the upcoming election with enough votes to allow it to govern alone, those who have made sacrifices to keep the pandemic from creating the devastation seen in other countries will be expecting Labour to use its majority to reward them for their contribution.

Are New Zealand's Greens worth a socialist vote? Three perspectives

Fightback asked for three perspectives from social justice campaigners over whether they would advise anti-capitalists to vote Green in the New Zealand election this October.

Fightback offers these perspectives as part of debate and we neither endorse nor oppose a Green vote in this election.



Sharon Bell, on behalf of the GreenLeft Network within the Green Party of Aotearoa/New Zealand

What precisely is the "GreenLeft Network" and what is your relationship to the Green Party of Aotearoa/NZ?

The GreenLeft Network (GLN) is one of a few formal membership networks within the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand. Other networks include Rainbow Greens, Inclusive Greens, Young Greens, and a number of other smaller interest-based networks. The GLN was established in 2014 as a response to a shift towards centrism within the Green Party. It initially started as a Facebook-based group but, following the establishment of the Budget Responsibility Rules in 2017, a group of members worked to formalise some of our operating structures and develop our Kaupapa Statement and Rules of Operation that guide how we function.

We aim to provide a home for lefties in the Green Party, as we work within the Party through mechanisms such as remits at the annual AGM to make change. We have over 200 members and members of the GLN also hold Party office roles, and focus on working constructively within Party processes for progressive change.

What does "GreenLeft" mean to you, in terms of kaupapa? Would you call yourself anti-capitalist or social-democratic?

Our Kaupapa Statement includes the following:

The GreenLeft Network holds true to the existing Green Party of Aotearoa Charter.

Further, the GreenLeft Network believes that the way to honour these principles is through a strong commitment to intersectional left-wing policies and analysis, with particular regard to an anti-capitalist stance and a critique of power.

We honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the tino rangatiratanga of hapū and iwi Māori, recognising that they did not cede their sovereignty... We are opposed to imperialism and militarism.

We recognise that capitalism produces a hierarchical classed society, which privileges profit accumulation at the expense of the many. We acknowledge that the capitalist system we live under is a base from which systems of oppression, hierarchy and division flow. We reject this, the GreenLeft Network aims to defend the rights of the poor and the working class, and fight all forms of marginalisation and oppression that capitalist society produces. We work to promote class analysis within the Green Party, as well as supporting those external groups already carrying out this work.

We reject "sustainable capitalism" as an oxymoron; we do not believe the market will ever be able to provide a genuine solution to climate change, and we indict the inherent violence of capitalism... We believe that our vision, and the Green Party's vision, for Aotearoa cannot be achieved by pandering, conservatism, incrementalism or arbitrary constraints on the political imaginary. We are in favour of the Green Party campaigning on a bold and

radical left-wing platform in electoral contests.

Whilst our members hold a healthy variety of positions and interpretations, all our members have to sign up to our Kaupapa Statement, and this keeps us ideologically unified.

What role GreenLeft has played in debates within the GPA/NZ recently? What struggles have you contributed to, and what (specifically) do you think your impact has been?

GLN members worked outside and inside the Party to drop the Budget Responsibility Rules, which we were successful with. Related to the current election, many top candidates in this year's Green List are GLN members and we support their campaigns. In 2019, we put forward a remit to make MP tithing [donation of a portion of their salaries] to the Party progressive, which was passed by consensus.

I'd like to remind you of a few things that your party co-leader James Shaw said about you in an interview with Stuff a few months ago.⁹³ Can you tell us in your own words what the context of your "alternative draft list" was? How would you describe your relationship with GPA/NZ leadership, including James Shaw, Marama Davidson and others?

The GLN list was drafted in the context of the Party list-ranking process where non-incumbent MP candidates don't fare well once the list is sent to the wider Party membership to vote upon. To overcome that, the GLN Executive underwent a process, including surveying the candidates for their views on issues, to establish a list of candidates that aligned well with the GLN Kaupapa, and communicated it privately to our members. Neither James Shaw nor anybody else in leadership has told us this was inappropriate. We always participate in Party democratic processes in good faith and strive to keep GLN members informed of how they can be involved.

Would you advise people who are explicitly anti-capitalist (members of groups like Fightback or Organise Aotearoa, Labour Party socialists, even anarchists) to vote for the Green Party this election – or even to join the GPA/NZ in order to fight alongside you?

⁹³ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/121694108/portrait-of-green-leader-james-shaw-labour-wasted-its-political-capital>

Yes. We have a diverse range of political affiliations and grassroots organisation memberships within the Network. Although parliamentary politics is by no means perfect, the Green Party is the best option, as its membership structure and member-driven policy, principles and values mean you can contribute more directly to creating change. We value the many different ways people contribute to Aotearoa's politics and voting Green is a worthwhile vote. Even if it's just one day out of 1094 days of being staunchly committed to other ways of creating change (awesome, please do!), voting Green is one way you can advocate for transformational reforms. And if you agree with our Kaupapa Statement, we'd love to have you on board!

Where do you see yourself in the context of other "GreenLeft" organisations overseas, some of which have achieved parliamentary representation or even government on their own (e.g. Iceland, Netherlands or Denmark)? What do you think you gain by being part of the GPA/NZ?

Being part of the GreenLeft Network, as with any Party network, provides solidarity and space to be ourselves, reflect and develop our vision according to our values and politics. It weaves together grassroots movements and the Party. We also have MPs who are part of the network. Creating another Party is not the aim of the Network, as the Greens are the only Party that can and will push for a Just Transition to a healthier, more equitable world.

It is heartening to see the ascendency of GreenLeft organisations overseas. We see it as the most natural and strategic alliance for an anti-capitalist politics. The Green Party in Aotearoa has radical roots, and by staying true to them we can see similar successes here.

What is your take on the compromises made to the Zero Carbon Act?

We are glad that there is broad consensus in Parliament that climate change is a crisis that cannot be ignored and must be addressed at a governmental level. A lot of us were disappointed with aspects of it, such as having a split target for methane which meant it was weaker than the carbon reduction target and counter to the preferred option based on public consultation, and

the omission of citizen litigation for enforcement. But we see the Zero Carbon Act as a starting point to build from, not the end of action.

Sharon invites those who support the GLN Kaupapa to join up online: [https://facebook.us18.list-manage.com/subscribe?](https://facebook.us18.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=e2c710e7fb7b15d0c9e3a6a5a&id=290e9d377c)



PETER SYKES is an Anglican minister and a long-time activist based in South Auckland. He is one of the founders and CEO of ME Family Services, a non-government organisation based in Mangere East with an environmental and social justice focus, which offers support to the community with an Early Childhood Education centre, waste minimisation, community gardening, social work and other initiatives. Sykes is standing as a Green Party candidate for the seat of Māngere, currently held by Labour's Aupito William Sio, the current Minister for Pacific Peoples.

What made you decide to put yourself forward as a Green Party candidate? Do you have a prior involvement with the Greens?

I have been Green at heart most of my life and was involved in the Values Party, an early form of green party, while at university. I have been a passive member for the past few years. The decision to step forward as a candidate was based on the lack of Green presence in Mangere, and a concern that Labour was not voicing the need for collaboration more strongly. I strongly believe in the vision and values of the Green Party ... built on a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the four pou [pillars] are: building on ecological wisdom (which I believe to be a regenerative understanding to the rhythm of ecosystems around us); social responsibility (a thriving community based on social and economic justice); appropriate decision-making (consensus decision making made directly at the appropriate level by those affected); and a commitment to nonviolence in all levels and contexts. Probably the major reason I have put myself forward as the candidate for Mangere is a belief that the Green Party is the only party which gives shape to my understanding a vision for a thriving, regenerative

Mangere now and into the future; and links into a context where we exist. I believe the Greens' principles challenge us to dig deeper into understanding the earth rhythms where we are ... and therefore challenge us to understand indigenous wisdom.

What do you think of the Greens' current leadership?

The party has leadership at three levels – parliament, party and membership. The party also seeks to have leadership which gives voice to the key values. Both these aspects are vital for me to be active at a local level – I can give voice to the issues and policy for myself and my communities. On a much more specific response – I am excited about the political leadership being shown by Marama Davidson and James Shaw. They are passionate and able voices to the diversity of the Greens. Beyond them those who have been put on the list are people I want to see in leadership - they have been tested by the party and by the members. I am proud to be associated with our list members, even though I choose not to put my name into the pool.

Mangere has traditionally been a strong Labour seat. Do you think the Labour government has been responsive to the needs of the voters in the past, particularly Pacific peoples?

The Labour Party has laid the foundation of an intergenerational wellbeing for our nation, which no other party has. However, because of the nature of politics in NZ, it has had to work hard for a significant middle ground. It has had to work at building an understanding of MMP in a time when aspirations nationally and internationally are in change and when we are facing economic, social and environmental challenges unlike any other age; and on top of that we are weaving (successfully?) through the global disruption of COVID-19.

However, with that strong foundation, I do not believe the voice of Mangere or the Pacific is heard within the Labour Party as a whole. I believe that Aupito, as local MP, is greatly supported by the Greens voice pushing for greater social and environmental justice.

Locally I think more needs to be done around 1] protecting our land and sea and streams – an issue highlighted by the beam of hope – Ihumatao. 2] Creating housing for our people – accessible and appropriate. Not based on economic models which continue to disconnect and isolate people. 3] We

need an economic model which celebrates and builds local resilience – especially our networks, our small businesses, and allows local solutions for local people. This means more local control over power, food, water, and decision making.

You are the only non-Pasifika candidate in Mangere. What support do you have in the Pasifika community?

Personally, I am proud to stand in Mangere and believe being Pakeha is, ironically, a strength. It is too stereotypical and simplistic to identify Mangere as ‘a Pasifika Community’. Mangere is in fact a city of many villages and communities. It is not a single spirit or mind. It has enormous resources and diversity that are being shut down because in a national and Auckland context it stands different. And in the midst of that I am one voice. Whether I have support from any of the communities will be up to them to say.

As an Anglican minister, how does Christianity fit with Green policies? Other parties (particularly New Conservatives) claim to represent “Christian” values such as opposition to abortion, LGBTI+ rights, etc. What is your response to them?

My understanding of Christianity has always placed me outside the institutional church in the borderlands, and sometimes ‘wasteland’. I have always stood for social justice and inclusion of the vulnerable. The Christian faith is as diverse as any other faith or belief system, and it is not exclusive. My belief as a Christian encourages me to, “act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” [Micah 6:8] Conservative beliefs seek to hold onto whatever truth they gather around. But it is not the only way of being a believer. My belief is based on walking with the lost, lonely and wounded and showing a vision of hope and future. [eg. Isaiah 65:17-26]

The Greens’ principles allow for me to be me, and walk with my faith.... and recognise both social responsibility and appropriate decision making. When applied to the ‘issues’ of abortion, LGBTI+ and the referendums on creating a framework for cannabis and ‘euthanasia’ my stand in support of these is based on a belief that 1] I will not block other people’s wellbeing, particularly if it does not personally impact on me; 2] I ensure that law is used for social justice not social control; and 3] I will ensure that those most vulnerable have a voice.

What is your vision for future Aotearoa New Zealand?

My vision of Aotearoa NZ is that of thriving, regenerative communities working together with people and planet to ensure the ongoing embracing of future generations. In placing that vision, I believe we need to make significant changes to our political and economic structures to enable this to become reality. The seeds of these changes are embedded in the living standards framework of the Labour Party and given voice in the vision and principles of the Green Party. Therefore, a party vote for Greens is an essential next step to move things along.

 **SUE BRADFORD, former Green Party MP and long-time ecosocialist, wrote an article in 2019 (<https://www.pundit.co.nz/content/the-greying-of-the-greens>) saying that she could not vote for the Green Party under the Shaw/Davidson leadership.**

I am still not sure how I will vote in the Sept 2020 election. The step towards wealth taxes and a minimum income for some people was progressive, and may influence a decision on my part to vote Green.

But at the same time, the level at which they set the income was too low for survival and didn’t go as far as the Basic Income which I support (in a progressive form). Also, I don’t know what else may emerge (or not emerge) from the Greens between now and Sept 20. I know in the past things have come out at the last minute that have reshaped my voting decision.

I regret deeply that the Greens have become so firmly a party whose scope remains within a framework of what I’d call ‘greening capitalism’ rather than firmly exposing and moving – at least to some extent – beyond the confines of neoliberal capitalism. The party’s position in earlier years was more ambiguous, especially during the period when Rod Donald was co-leader.

At the same time, I agree with you that often enough it is important to support a party and/or candidate whose position is not what I’d call ‘radical left’, and in fact my whole twelve years as an active Green Party member, candidate and then MP were an example of my own willingness to compromise sufficiently to take part in parliamentary politics,

because I thought it was important to try and shift the Greens – and the public discourse – to the left, on social, economic, Tiriti and ecological issues.

I believe it was worth the effort, in part because of the three private member's bills I got through, but also because I was able to use the MP platform to amplify advocacy for the causes I most strongly advocate for, and for people whose interests are usually not strongly represented in Parliament.

The Green Party of that period (1998–2009) welcomed me as a member and – for the most part – supported me as candidate and MP, with the most significant internal support coming from Rod Donald and of course quite a few others within the party. Losing the co-leadership contest to Metiria Turei in 2009 revealed clearly how much support I, and the left wing of the party, had lost since Rod's death at the end of 2005 – and how much the party had shifted to wanting to be a safe, non-radical, more centrist and even blue-leaning party on both social

and environmental issues. Despite a staunch fight back in recent times from some great left people inside the party that shift to the 'safe' centre has just kept going since then, accentuated by James Shaw's co-leadership.

While I know some people would see me as reformist for this, I continue to believe it is important to vote and to engage in other ways with parliamentary politics. If we want to build for transformational constitutional change alongside Māori, we need to build strength on the Pākehā/tauiwi side of politics to become partners with the strength inside and outside Parliament to achieve that change. The big problem I have at present is that there is no party in whose kaupapa I have enough belief to go out and say to others 'vote for 'x' or 'join 'y''. At this stage I do not feel able to do that for the Greens or Labour much less anyone else, which is not to say I won't vote – just that at this stage my voting decision remains uncertain, and may stay that way until the last moment.

The crowded mess on NZ's populist Right

By BYRON CLARK

The 2020 election has shown that New Zealand is not immune to the wave of right-wing populism that we've seen overseas. In June *Fightback* covered the entry of various far-right ideas and individuals into the New Conservative Party.⁹⁴ *Newshub* picked up the story in July.⁹⁵ *Right Minds* founder Dieuwe de Boer, who has described his movement as having overlapping goals with the content of the Christchurch shooters manifesto is standing for the party in the Botany electorate.⁹⁶ Deputy leader Elliot Ikilei talks about the superiority of Western culture, and has repeatedly denied that the shooter was a

white supremacist.⁹⁷ (Leader Leighton Baker usually appears more moderate.)

The party is a rebranding of the old Conservative Party led by Colin Craig, which in 2014 came close to getting representation in parliament with 4% of the vote. In 2017 though, without Craig's leadership – and without his substantial financial backing, their vote plummeted to 0.2%, just over 6,000 votes. In the intervening years, however, they have built a sizable following on social media, especially Facebook, and typically poll at around 1%.

While their zero net migration policy dates back to the Craig era, New Conservative courted a

⁹⁴ <https://fightback.org.nz/2020/06/12/how-the-far-right-found-a-home-in-the-new-conservative-party/>

⁹⁵ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/shows/2020/07/new-conservatives-defend-western-culture-as-greatest-in-the-world-warn-nz-sliding-toward-socialism.html>

⁹⁶ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/christchurch-shooting/111387889/radical-losers-and-lone-wolves-what-drives-the-altright>

⁹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUwlWIRQzeU>

particularly xenophobic base through their involvement in the campaign against the UN Migration Compact which had been started by far-right groups in Europe.⁹⁸ That campaign had been worryingly successful, with mainstream right-wing parties adopting opposition to the compact as policy. When the man who carried out the mass shooting in Christchurch was revealed to have had “here’s your migration compact!” written on one of his guns, National and ACT backtracked on their opposition. This resulted in a minor scandal after National removed a petition against the compact from their website in the immediate aftermath of the massacre, claimed it had been removed weeks earlier, and when that was shown to be false, scapegoated a former press secretary who then leader Simon Bridges described as an “emotional junior staffer”.⁹⁹ The New Conservatives however have dug in their heels on the issue.

The party has fomented a panic about transgender “ideology” being taught in schools,¹⁰⁰ and has a policy to put solo mothers in “residential accommodation with a suitably trained/experienced couple as hosts.”¹⁰¹ Despite their ideal New Zealand sounding like The Republic of Gilead from Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, the New Conservatives avoid referring to themselves as an explicitly Christian party.

In March 2019 Ikilei told *The Spinoff* that “Despite not being a Christian party, we are the only party who has universal values that Christians hold to.”¹⁰² However, as Ikilei gave that interview, Destiny

Church, the evangelical ministry led by Brian Tamaki, was also launching a party. They had done so before, with the Destiny Party gaining 0.6% of the vote in 2005. The new party, today called Vision New Zealand after the electoral commission rejected the name ‘Coalition New Zealand’, is led by Hannah Tamaki (wife of Brian).

Vision has come out with numerous alt-right friendly statements, with Tamaki calling for a 97% cut to immigration numbers,¹⁰³ suggesting that rather than accepting refugees New Zealand should pay them not to come here¹⁰⁴ and vowing to ban the construction of new “mosques, temples and other foreign buildings of worship” if elected.¹⁰⁵ Her husband Brian had previously claimed that broadcasting the Islamic call to prayer across the country during a remembrance service in for the Christchurch mosque shooting would turn New Zealand into an Islamic state,¹⁰⁶ and in a sponsored Facebook post stated “we can not accept the proliferation of Islam in our country”.

Despite Vision’s obvious links to Destiny Church, Tamaki, much like the leaders of New Conservative, has claimed that her political vehicle is not a Christian party. This makes it possible for the newly registered ONE party to somewhat accurately make the claim that they are the only Christian Party running in the 2020 election.

ONE offers, according to their website, “a fresh wave of political forerunners who uphold not only the Christian values, but the Christ that we value”.¹⁰⁷ To

⁹⁸ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/31-12-2019/summer-reissue-the-furious-world-of-new-zealands-far-right-nationalists/>; <https://www.politico.eu/article/united-nations-migration-pact-how-got-trolled/>

⁹⁹ <https://www.odt.co.nz/news/national/emotional-junior-staffer-national-worker-who-deleted-petition-not-so-junior>

¹⁰⁰ <https://fightback.org.nz/2019/08/23/a-report-from-the-new-conservative-meeting-in-christchurch/>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.newconservative.org.nz/welfare-policy>

¹⁰² <https://thespinoff.co.nz/the-bulletin/23-05-2019/the-bulletin-christian-and-conservative-party-field-gets-crowded>

¹⁰³ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/05/hannah-tamaki-calls-for-97-percent-immigration-cut.html>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/10/hannah-tamaki-wants-to-pay-refugees-not-to-come-to-new-zealand.html>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2019/11/hannah-tamaki-s-vision-nz-says-it-will-ban-the-construction-of-mosques-temples-and-other-foreign-buildings.html>

¹⁰⁶ https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12241008

¹⁰⁷ <https://oneparty.net/faq/>

hammer the point home, the party launched at the site of the first Christian service held in New Zealand.¹⁰⁸

On immigration, ONE stops short of the dramatic cuts proposed by Vision and the New Conservatives (though they would slash the annual refugee intake from 1500 to just 350). Aspects of the policy appear to have been written with Muslim immigrants in mind, appealing to those concerned about potential ‘Sharia law’ with the position that “Immigrants entering New Zealand cannot advocate or practice alternative law courts contrary to New Zealand law courts”.¹⁰⁹

Surprisingly for a party their size, one of their ten policies is on Israel (there is no detailed policy on relations with any other country).¹¹⁰ ONE would like to see New Zealand establish an embassy in Jerusalem and apologise to Israel for New Zealand’s sponsoring of UN Resolution 2334, which states that Israel’s settlement activity in the occupied territories constitutes a “flagrant violation” of international law. These views are shared by the New Conservatives, who list New Zealand–Israel relations as one of their eight policy pillars.¹¹¹ Presumably in both cases the policy and the priority given to it results from the influence of Christian Zionism in these groups.¹¹²

For the New Conservatives, this policy upset the anti-Semitic supporters they had picked up by speaking at rallies attended by the far-right. “Jews

are a threat to the Goyim, that’s their name for non-Jews, it means ‘Cattle.’” wrote one commenter on the Facebook post announcing the policy.¹¹³ “I was a huge supporter until this. This is your true colours laid bare. Total Ziocon shills.” wrote another.¹¹⁴

The Outdoors Party

The Outdoors Party was formed in 2015, so will be contesting their second election this year. In 2017, they won 1,620 votes, just over half of the 3,005 gained by the single issue Ban1080 party. With that party gone, The Outdoors Party has picked up the issue and plans to ride a wave of opposition to the use of “1080” poison for pest control to parliament.¹¹⁵ (They have yet to register in any polls)

The party also seeks a moratorium on the roll out of fifth generation mobile technology (5G).¹¹⁶ Fears about the technology, including conspiracy theories linking it to the Covid-19 pandemic, have become widespread, resulting in a number of arson attacks on communications infrastructure.¹¹⁷ In a statement on the arsons, party co-leader Sue Grey was quoted as saying “The New Zealand Outdoors Party understands the frustrations felt by New Zealanders as unwanted new cell towers have emerged like pimples around New Zealand, without consultation or consent from local residents or councils”.¹¹⁸ (The mobile towers that have been set alight were not 5G towers.)

¹⁰⁸ https://www.nzherald.co.nz/northern-advocate/news/article.cfm?c_id=1503450&objectid=12340560

¹⁰⁹ <https://oneparty.net/priorities/immigration/>

¹¹⁰ <https://oneparty.net/priorities/israel/>

¹¹¹ <https://www.newconservative.org.nz/nz-israel-position-statement>

¹¹² <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/18-08-2020/a-revelation-in-marton-the-spinoff-meets-new-zealands-newest-christian-party/>

¹¹³ https://www.facebook.com/NewConservativeNZ/posts/2368235069919483?comment_id=2368617633214560

¹¹⁴ https://www.facebook.com/NewConservativeNZ/posts/2368235069919483?comment_id=2368640313212292

¹¹⁵ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/11-01-2020/outdoors-party-reckons-it-can-ride-an-anti-1080-wave-to-parliament-in-2020/>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1080_usage_in_New_Zealand

¹¹⁶ <https://www.outdoorsparty.co.nz/nz-outdoors-party-policy-on-5g/>

¹¹⁷ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/18-05-2020/how-5g-and-covid-19-mixed-to-make-a-toxic-conspiracy-cocktail/>

¹¹⁸ <https://suegrey.co.nz/index.php/2020/05/18/cell-towers-burning-off-democracy/>

The party made headlines in June, but perhaps not for the reasons they would like. At a rally where supporters were encouraged to share thoughts by writing in chalk on the pavement, a woman (not involved with the rally) rubbed out the phrase “it’s okay to be white” a slogan that began as a trolling campaign on 4chan and was soon adopted by white supremacists.¹¹⁹ An Outdoors Party supporter chased the young woman, who is Asian, yelling “You are racist! You are racist against us New Zealanders, now get out! Look at you rubbing out all of our words – go back to your own country!”¹²⁰

In March the party had absorbed another small right-wing populist group, The Real New Zealand Party, with founder David Moffet being appointed to their board. “When it became apparent that the Real NZ Party was not going to reach the 500 member threshold to form a party, it engaged in discussions with the NZ Outdoors Party. It quickly became evident that they are a great bunch of people with almost identical aspirations to ours.” he said in a press release.¹²¹

Moffet, a former New Zealand Rugby CEO, had previously been on the board of the New Conservative Party (it’s unclear why he left to form his own party). *Stuff* reported that he was motivated to get involved in politics by the campaign against the UN Migration Compact. Moffet claimed that the pact would lead to “plane loads” of violent rapists from East Africa arriving in New Zealand and that a “boatload” of 200 Indians was on its way.¹²²

“I don’t think they are refugees.” Moffet told *Stuff* in January 2019:

...immigrants is not the right word. I don’t want to use the word invaders because I don’t want

this to be right in everybody’s faces. But they are seeking to land in a welfare country such as New Zealand and they are doing it illegally...what the people smugglers tell them [is] if you get to Australia or New Zealand... they’ll give you a house, they’ll give you medical, free schooling, free everything else.

Moffett’s imagined boatload of Indians never arrived; in fact, no asylum seekers have reached New Zealand by boat. When asylum seekers do arrive in New Zealand by plane, they are not given houses, medical care and schooling. They are detained in prisons. “You know the last 20 years of policy and action on this issue is actually pretty shameful.” Amnesty International’s Anneliese Johnson told *The New Zealand Herald* in January. “I think a lot of people would be surprised to know that we have asylum seekers currently in our prisons in New Zealand.”¹²³

The New Zealand Public Party

A late comer is the New Zealand Public Party, led by Billy Te Kahika Jr, son of a famous blues-rock guitarist and a noted musician himself.¹²⁴ Te Kahika started the party after his Facebook live videos claiming that the public wasn’t being given the true facts about the coronavirus gained a large audience. The government’s support for the goals of the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is also a concern for him. “Where this is all going is Jacinda wants to sign us up to the UN programme Agenda 2030 and that’s a complete destruction of Kiwi freedoms and democracy.” he told *Waatea News*.¹²⁵

These goals, which relate to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace

¹¹⁹ <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/its-okay-to-be-white>

¹²⁰ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/06/race-relations-commissioner-blasts-appalling-racist-abuse-towards-young-woman-at-outdoors-party-rally.html>

¹²¹ <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO2003/S00246/former-rugby-ceo-david-moffett-joins-the-nz-outdoors-party-as-executive-director.htm>

¹²² <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/110099964/former-nz-rugby-boss-david-moffett-now-tackling-populist-politics>

¹²³ https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12339908

¹²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billy_TK

¹²⁵ https://www.waateanews.com/waateanews/x_news/MjQ5NjI/Paakiwaha/COVID-19-gives-Billy-TK-the-UN-red-flag-blues

and justice, were agreed upon by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030. Its predecessor, Agenda 21, which came out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, is a popular target of right-wing conspiracy theorists.

"The demonization of Agenda 21 began among extremist groups like the John Birch Society" reads an article on the website of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a US based organisation that tracks extremist groups. "The Birch Society and an array of other radical-right groups see Agenda 21 and virtually all other global efforts as part of a nefarious plan on the part of global elites to form a socialistic one-world government, or "New World Order."¹²⁶ This "Bircher" rhetoric is echoed by the NZ Public Party: "It does not matter which of the two main colours you vote for" reads their website. "They are both in bed with the UN, despite the fact that YOU, the public, never voted for this".¹²⁷

Right-wing unity?

Billy Te Kahika made overtures to the other right-populist parties to merge with his NZ Public Party. An arrangement with Vision New Zealand looked close to happening. "Our proposal to Vision was simple & consistent with what we had discussed with members and other parties" wrote Te Kahika in a statement posted to Facebook by the party. "1. Merge with NZPP and rebrand to NZPP. 2. Hannah could be Deputy Leader 3. We would take all of and respect their candidates."¹²⁸

But in a "last-minute meeting" Vision had apparently decided Hannah Tamaki would remain leader with Te Kahika as deputy. Te Kahika rejected this arrangement. "This would have destroyed all that NZPP stood for and built. We were astounded at the lack of integrity and forthrightness of a 'Christian' organisation."

An attempt to merge with the Outdoors Party also failed, according to *Waatea News*.¹²⁹ A statement

published on the Outdoors Party Facebook page claims "There is almost mass hysteria on facebook begging us to join with Billy Te Kahika and the Public Party." and lists eleven questions they want answered before any possible merger. Among them:

We understand Michael Stace (formerly known as Michael Leon) who proposed the Reset NZ Party is involved in marketing Billy. We need clarification as to why he changed his name and an explanation about his "Master Mason" title and his work for and any ongoing relationship with the Freemasons so our team can better understand and implications this may have.¹³⁰

It seems promoting UN Agenda 2030 conspiracy theories isn't enough to get other conspiracy theorists on side if your organisation has a Masonic connection. "I'm gonna tell you right now, I'm not going to be voting for the New Zealand Public Party" states Damien de Ment, an American expat who has become New Zealand's biggest promoter of the Qanon conspiracy on YouTube.

I have too many concerns, too many red flags have come up in the last couple of weeks. For instance, party manager Michael Stace, his background in Free Masonry (sic) – he was the director of communications and marketing for the Free Masons of New Zealand, that's a pretty big title for an organisation that has tentacles in a lot of places".¹³¹

De Ment is voting for the New Conservatives, he explains:

They may not be jawboning the whole truth movement that I'm very passionate about, ya' know, crimes against humanity, Qanon, taking down the cabal and the deep state, but I promise you, Elliot and Leighton know that these – this paradigm exists, that these conspiracies are absolutely real, but they have to run an effective campaign to get as many votes as they can and appeal to a wider audience. So you may be

¹²⁶ <https://www.splcenter.org/20140331/agenda-21-un-sustainability-and-right-wing-conspiracy-theory>

¹²⁷ <https://www.nzpublicparty.org.nz/un-agenda-21-and-agenda-2030>

¹²⁸ <https://bit.ly/32HVYnM>

¹²⁹ https://www.waateanews.com/waateanews/x_news/MjUwMTc/Public-Party-praying-for-electoral-lifeline

¹³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/nzoutdoorsparty/posts/3390632597661581>

¹³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyL0jLqvskY>

frustrated right now that they're not talking about these truth topics as much as the New Zealand Public Party, but I don't see how the New Zealand Public Party right now is benefiting the political landscape if they're not even registered yet.

On YouTube, still the video platform of choice for voters who have rejected the “mainstream media”, the differences between the various minor parties are debated and defended. “Billy's a really charismatic guy, I like him.” says Elliot Ikilei, appearing on *The Vinny Eastwood Show*. “From the very first time we had lunch it was really cool. I like the way he thinks about – in terms of specific agenda items and the UN.”¹³²

Eastwood is a New Zealander, but his show is broadcast on *American Freedom Radio* (as well as on YouTube), AFR shows cover all the usual topics for conspiracy theory enthusiasts – chemtrails, UFOs, the New World Order etc. When I visit for researching this article, their website tells me that there have been over 21,000 other visits from New Zealand this month.

“When it was discussed about the idea of a merger” continues Ikilei “or at least the model that was put forward, we politely declined.” The New Conservative Party believes joining with the New Zealand Public Party would have resulted in them doing most of the work, but Billy Te Kahika getting the publicity. This episode of the show is sponsored, somewhat ironically, by The New Zealand Public Party, who seem to know where to find a receptive audience.

Te Kahika: a polarising figure

Aside from petty sectarianism and clashing egos, a significant divide on the populist fringe is race. To some Pākehā social media personalities Billy Te Kahika appeared to come out of nowhere with a large following, but conspiratorial ideas have been gaining a foothold among Māori for some time. That a Māori populist leader would emerge parallel to but independent from the likes of New

Conservative, who favour abolishing the Māori seats in parliament and call institutional racism a “well debunked myth”¹³³ is not wholly surprising.

“Amid this pandemic, the conspiracy theories are like a virus on social media...Māori are really susceptible, it seems to me, to these kinds of really bad information and fake news” That was how Bay of Plenty regional councillor Toi Iti put it in a livestreamed korero with Waikato MP Tamati Coffey in April. “It's driving me crazy, is it driving you crazy Tamati?”

“It is driving me crazy” replied Coffey “it's driving me crazy, in fact I was asked about it this morning, the whole 5G thing...I don't believe in chemtrails, but I know plenty of my whānau that have brought into it, and subscribe to the Facebook pages and get updates regularly.”¹³⁴

Karaitiana Taiuru, a Māori cultural adviser in the STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) area, and a doctoral student at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, told *The Spinoff* that Māori communities are vulnerable to believing these kinds of ideas because of widespread, generational mistrust in the government.¹³⁵

For Terry Opines, a far-right YouTuber who is supporting the New Conservatives, Te Kahika's connection to te ao Māori is a big red flag:

I want some real questions answered, like who's funding him, is he being funded by Iwi? And why is he so closely associated with Mark Solomon? The former leader of Ngai Tahu, is he funding him? and given the fact that his business interests have focused explicitly on Māori interests as opposed to New Zealanders in general we must ask this question, is he a separatist?

These questions were asked in one of what are now several exposé style videos on Te Kahika.¹³⁶

Lee Williams, the man behind another local far-right YouTube channel; ‘Cross The Rubicon’ spoke of the backlash he received for sharing Opines' video “I got

¹³² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGlnVrwtkul>

¹³³ <https://www.facebook.com/NewConservativeNZ/photos/a.552878204788521/3080786001997716/>

¹³⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=553179278654470>

¹³⁵ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/14-07-2020/why-māori-communities-are-more-vulnerable-to-5g-conspiracies/>

¹³⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L113FB319_o

a backlash for backing up Terry’s video and sharing Terry’s video...a lot of people got on to me calling me a racist, racist against Māori – and some of these people have been my subscribers in the past”.¹³⁷

Williams has posted numerous videos where he scaremongers about immigration, particularly of Muslims. He was visited twice by police following the attacks on Al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic centre, and has used that incident to further his popularity on YouTube, today he has over 13,000 subscribers. The Māori share of that audience were evidently on board when he spoke about foreigners, but have now changed their opinion of him.

“I’m getting so much push back from my last video with concerns of Billy TK’s NZPP.” Williams wrote in a text post on YouTube. “Some real venom showed here calling me racist and Māori hater. It’s like I’ve asked questions of someone from the left, and the cultural Marxists have come out to do what they do.”¹³⁸

Where next for the populist right?

Williams reneged on his opposition to Te Kahika after meeting with him at his motel room in Christchurch. On the 15th of July he posted a video titled “For the greater good of this nation we should join together”:

For the greater good of New Zealand sacrifices have to be made by the leaders of the smaller parties [he wrote in the description]... Put your differences, and egos aside to be stronger as one United force. The most important thing now, with two months to go to the election is getting this UN, CCP, WHO, Soros, Gates backed puppet out of power. Jacinda has to go!¹³⁹

William’s rhetoric is detached from reality, as the combined vote for these five parties is at best 2%, but commenters on his video turn the detachment dial up to 11: “Māori and European nationalists must join to defeat the radical left who will destroy New Zealand’s traditions and way of life...2020 is the most important election NZ has ever faced.”

On July 26, Billy Te Kahika announced an alliance with Jami-Lee Ross, parliament’s only independent MP. Ross was elected on the National Party ticket and is expected not to retain his electorate seat. Te Kahika will stand in the Māori electorate of Te Tai Tokerau, where his Christian ministry is based. A win is unlikely but not necessarily impossible.

Ross told media that the goal was to form a “centrist version” of the Alliance, a left-of-Labour grouping that existed in the 1990s and 2000s. The New Conservatives and the Outdoors Party reiterated their disinterest in this idea. Geoff Simmons from the Opportunities Party, a populist party that unlike the aforementioned could fairly be called centrist, was even less keen: “no way would I ever stand on a stage and shake hands with those snake oil salesmen.” he told *The Spinoff*.¹⁴⁰

Social Credit, who were part of the original Alliance, have been approached, as has the Heartland New Zealand Party led by former Franklin District mayor Mark Ball. Vision New Zealand appear to have burnt their bridges. Even if some sort of alliance is cobbled together in the weeks leading up to the election, it looks like there will be multiple parties competing for the same target audience of right leaning conspiracy theorists.

Most voters will go to the polls and wonder who all these parties are. Those who sympathise with these group’s views will make a decision as to which one will get their tick, or in some cases cast a vote for National or ACT out of concern a minor party vote would be ineffective.

By the time the 2023 election rolls around, it’s unlikely the exact same parties will be there. Conservative Christianity has always had a small political presence in New Zealand, so it’s probable that at least one party will be around to represent those voters. With the decline of New Zealand First, the traditional choice for voters motivated by xenophobia, it’s possible New Conservative could fill that niche – perhaps while also being the choice for Christian fundamentalist voters.

¹³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yoMxSs3oVQ>

¹³⁸ https://www.youtube.com/post/UgynPk8_11oi5CJD3JF4AaABCQ

¹³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTfiPO0mQNQ>

¹⁴⁰ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/26-07-2020/jami-lee-ross-billy-te-kahika-and-the-rebel-alliance-of-election-2020/>

Diewue de Boer, who straddles both those demographics, has indicated he is in this for the long haul. "I hope to learn lots from this campaign season, contribute as much as I can, and look forward to being part of conservative politics in the coming decades" he wrote in the introduction to his speech at the New Conservative campaign launch.¹⁴¹

As social media platforms do more to prevent the spread of misinformation – Twitter recently removed 7,000 accounts associated with the Qanon conspiracy, for example¹⁴² – the growth of these movements will slow. Research has shown that as a tactic to limit the spread of disinformation, deplatforming works.¹⁴³ Nonetheless, conspiracy theories and far-right beliefs existed prior to the rise of social media, so deplatforming won't make them disappear entirely. Applying a false information label to content shared by the New Conservatives (as Facebook did last April) might deter a few potential supporters, but not those already convinced that fact-checking is part of a vast left-wing conspiracy.

The hard-right in New Zealand is inspired and motivated by events overseas: Brexit in the UK, the election of Donald Trump in the US and the success of various ideologically similar parties in Europe – Hungary in particular- so to some extent what happens in this country will depend on what happens elsewhere.

The perfect storm of factors that led to five different right-wing populist parties - or even more, depending on how loosely one defines right-wing populist – gaining enough members to be on the ballot (even if only the largest of them managed to register in polls) is likely to be confined to 2020, but the views these groups espouse will continue to be a part of New Zealand's political landscape. The question is whether they will return to the margins, or inch closer to the mainstream. Dr M. R. X.

Dentith, a philosopher and conspiracy theory expert, told *Newsroom* that we shouldn't ignore these movements because of their small size.

Part of the problem with the growth of the alt-right in Europe and the US, for a long period of time we said these people are minor parts of the population, they're always going to be around, but they're not particularly big and they're not particularly popular. We can ignore them in political debates...

And that allowed them to grow in the background with no one paying any attention to them to the point where they actually emerged as a big problem. Actually, if we had dealt with this years ago, this wouldn't be an issue now.¹⁴⁴

 **New Conservative NZ**
15 Apr at 2:33 PM • 3

It has been dizzying to see the amount of information with fact and fiction being intertwined.

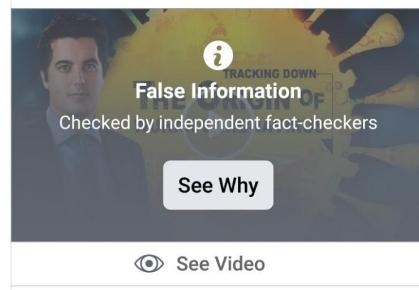
After watching and confirming the links, we submit what we find to be the most factually led article, from a quality organisation.

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147

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New Conservatives promote conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 virus being bacteriological warfare by the Chinese Communist Party; Facebook attaches a warning label.

¹⁴¹ <https://www.rightminds.nz/articles/doing-what-works-my-speech-new-conservative-2020-campaign-launch>

¹⁴² <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/22/qanon-twitter-bans-7-000-accounts-linked-to-conspiracy-theory-group-thecube>

¹⁴³ <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2019/10/04/deplatforming-works-lets-get-on-with-it/>

¹⁴⁴ <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/26-07-2020/jami-lee-ross-billy-te-kahika-and-the-rebel-alliance-of-election-2020/>



Pasifika people and the New Zealand election

By SALOTE CAMA¹⁴⁵

As New Zealand prepares to go to the polls in September, the debates will often be about how the government will distribute resources, what gets prioritised in this COVID-19 world, the housing crisis, and the ongoing climate crises. I am an indigenous Fijian, living and working in New Zealand, so my experience of New Zealand politics is coloured. Obviously, there are many differences between New Zealand governance and Fijian governance. Fiji is a republic, New Zealand has an MMP system, Fiji is essentially one massive electorate, and many more to name. However, there are similarities as well. Both governments are heavily invested in maintaining their influence in the region, both countries had a failed push for a change to the Union Jack on our flags in the early 2010s, and both

governments are institutions built on the foundation of controlling native land for the British colonial administration.

My understanding of politics is coloured by who I am as an indigenous Fijian person, and this is highly tuned into the politics of land. How land is understood is similar in both iTaukei (indigenous Fijian) and Māori cultures, and this is evidenced in the words used in both languages – *vanua* in vosa vaka Viti and *whenua* in te reo Māori. For iTaukei land is not just the physical entity – it is what all aspects of life and society are structured around. It informs education, relationships, status, anxieties and powers. Fears of land alienation was the reason given for Fiji's first coup d'état. May 14, 1987 saw Dr Timoci Bavadra removed as Fiji's Prime Minister. The coup was led by then Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni

¹⁴⁵ Editor's note on style: Salote uses the term *Pasifika* in this article to refer to the various peoples of the Pacific Islands. Elsewhere in this issue we have used the alternative spelling *Pasefika* (which is from the Samoan language) or simply referred to "Pacific peoples".

Rabuka (currently serving as Fiji's Leader of the Opposition). Two (or three, or three and a half, depending on your count) more coups have since followed, all somewhat related to these same anxieties.

Land alienation is something indigenous peoples around the world have had to grapple with, and this is definitely true when it comes to New Zealand. Fiji, some consider, to be an anomaly. iTaukei, in this case, own roughly 90% of land. This coupled with the fact that, apart from tourism, the Fiji economy is held up by land-intensive industries like agriculture, timber, and sugar. This could indicate that there is a legacy of the British colonial administration, and their "benevolence". This benevolence is a myth. iTaukei Fijians own the land, but do not control it. They own the land as part of land-owning units called mataqali – a colonial administrative creation. This control is held in an institution called the iTaukei Land Trust Board (TLTB). The TLTB is the current iteration of the administrative process that determines what is done to iTaukei land, and has done so, on behalf of the colonial government, and in turn the Fijian state, since the turn of the twentieth century.

The colonial project in Viti, in Aotearoa, and in the Pacific was - and is - a series of power plays that seek to gain position and influence for the colonial powers. It is interested only in its own protection and its own authority. Our lands were no longer extensions of who we are, but instead a means of production – a means of gaining wealth to prop up colonialism and capitalism. Our lands were also used to take advantage, to sow distrust, to disenfranchise, and to break collectives.

Land is not immediately at the forefront of the current crop of questions that voters are supposedly asking during the New Zealand election campaign. The economy, COVID-19 recovery, the housing crisis, the climate crises: these are what the hoardings dotting fences on busy streets are centred on. Peel back these questions, and you can see that essentially voters are asking *what are we prioritising?* The New Zealand Labour Party is going into these elections with a wave of political capital, and generally high polling numbers. Its leader, Jacinda Ardern, is the face of a globally recognised ~kindness~ brand of politics. Its opposition, the New Zealand National Party, is marred by recent bouts of in-fighting, scandals, low polling numbers and a controversial leader in Judith Collins. Some of the

strongest Labour seats in the last election are Pasifika strongholds: there is a strong affiliation between Pasifika communities and the Labour Party. The official Labour campaign launch at Auckland's Town Hall saw a single announcement of policy from the Labour Party – a regurgitation of National Party policy from 2012, albeit with more funding (this funding will be from the unspent wage subsidy funding). What does this mean for Fijian, and Pasifika, voters in New Zealand? Loyalty to a party, flush with political capital, who has given us *just* one piece of centrist policy with just over a month to the elections.

The traumas of the colonial project in the Pacific are not only being actively ignored, but are being added to. From the military-industrial complex that is demanding war games in the middle of a pandemic in Hawai'i, to Judith Collins dismissing the goals of mana whenua to protect Ihumātao as "nonsense," to the loud silence of the New Zealand government in the face of the continued oppression of West Papua by the Indonesian government, and the current refusal to support the West Papua Decolonisation Committee at the United Nations – these traumas are painful, complex, and have ever-changing faces.

Maybe the question of *what this (election) means for Fijian, and Pasifika, voters in New Zealand* is not necessarily a fair, or good question. Pasifika communities in New Zealand are not just invested in the results of the New Zealand elections. We are too diverse and invested to have a solidly satisfying monolithic answer. Perhaps I am asking too much of a system that sees whenua as just another means that can further entrench capitalism, another means to further promote colonialism. And because it cannot see the whenua as what it really is, it cannot see us as wholly who we are – because the *vanua* is inherently a part of our being. Our survival as a culture is predicated on the protection of whenua, of fonua, of vanua. This is not a "proper" election issue, nor is it a Labour Party specific issue, and Pasifika people will most likely remain loyal to the Labour Party through the upcoming elections. But in the immortal words of Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi "withdrawal or non-participation is an option open to idealists and cynics... we owe it to ... ourselves to deal with the consequences as they are, not as we would like them to be."

The left should criticise Daniel Andrews

By KATH LARKIN. Originally published at <https://redflag.org.au/node/7305>



The state of Victoria has the highest COVID-19 infection and death rates in Australia and a premier who has managed to maintain a left veneer despite his neoliberal and law and order agendas, which have resulted in the privatisation of vital services such as aged and disability care and an increasing imprisonment rate for Aboriginal people.

The government of Daniel Andrews has come under pressure from the federal Coalition government and right-wing media pushing a pro-business agenda. Victoria's previous restrictions had come close to eliminating the virus, but Andrews buckled and prematurely reopened the economy.

It's true that there are plenty of hypocrites from the right who, despite pushing for a dangerous reopening prior to the second wave, now criticise Andrews from the right. We should have no truck with these people. But the left can't give Andrews a free pass just because he is being attacked from the right. The Labor Party has just as much muck and blood on its hands as the Liberal Party right now. Labor members on local councils, alongside both Liberal and Greens councillors, have privatised aged care services. The Andrews government privatised disability services. And just eight days after pledging to support low-paid and insecure workers, Labor leader Anthony Albanese argued not only that JobKeeper should be cut, but also that many workers receiving the payments were undeserving.

The number of infections climbed and climbed before Andrews finally offered a support payment to those testing positive to COVID-19. Even then, it was days after the revelation that 90 percent of people were not self-isolating after first developing symptoms. The \$300 payment to workers unable to access other forms of paid leave was welcome but long overdue and inadequate. No worker should be forced to use their annual or sick leave to take time off to ensure the health and safety of others. Governments and employers should provide paid time off.

Most of us looked on in horror and scrambled to find ways to help when, without warning or preparation, Victoria Police laid siege to the public housing towers. Many of those suddenly under guard were refugees with serious trauma from authoritarian governments and the inhuman mandatory detention regime of Australia. With no plans or preparations, public housing residents were forced to go days without food or necessary supplies. Family members and volunteers were initially blocked by police when they attempted to get necessities into the towers. It's not just that the siege was done in a way that showed no respect for the rights of the poor – the long-term neglect of public housing was also exposed.

Labor's planning minister, Richard Wynne, denied permission to have public health information disseminated in the public housing towers in the languages spoken by the residents. And there was inadequate protective equipment and cleaning to help prevent an outbreak in the first place. Long before this, Labor has been hell bent on selling public housing for the sham of "social housing". Planning documents show that most of the public housing estates Labor is knocking down will be turned into private complexes, with just a fraction of the land set aside to construct new "social" housing.

Many larger homes accommodating families will be replaced with one- and two-bedroom units. The government is also giving no guarantees that new "social" housing will be managed publicly. Instead,

indications are that it will be managed by non-government housing associations that aren't required to give tenants the same protections they have in public housing.

The other scandal is that the government's mismanagement of quarantine hotels is responsible for the spread of this deadly virus. Unions have been highlighting the problems of outsourcing and privatisation for years. But who did the government put in charge of this vital public health service? Dodgy security subcontractors. Whistleblowers have reported the lack of safety protocols, proper infection control training and access to safety equipment. Not only were workers' lives put at risk by a government more focused on money than public health, but the entire community was put at risk.

Due to their low pay, job insecurity and the fact that we're in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, workers were not only under pressure to work while unwell but were also working multiple jobs, which led to the further spread of the virus. Andrews and the media have attempted to turn these vulnerable workers, some of whom have bravely come forward to blow the whistle, into the villains of the story.

Refusing to call out the crimes of the Labor Party puts workers in more danger. Sadly, this is the case with the trade union movement, which is supposed to be our defence against the barbarities of capitalism. The unwillingness of most union leaders to criticise Andrews publicly or stand up to the priorities of business weakens our fight.

Trade unions should be seizing on this moment to fight for safety, job security, pandemic pay, bringing public services back into public hands and more. They should have backed teacher unionists crying out for the closing of schools. But rank-and-file teachers had to go it alone with no support from their union. We had the ridiculous situation in which the principals' association – the bosses' union – was calling for school closures while the workers' union was against it. This is where the politics of standing with Daniel Andrews and the Labor Party leads.

And look at what's going on in the aged care facilities. Long before the second wave hit, we had evidence of the dangers of potentially fatal outbreaks in aged care facilities. But decades of funding neglect and privatisation from both Labor and Liberal state, federal and local governments

ensured that this vulnerable population was being cared for by overworked, insecure and low-paid workers. Like the security guards, many workers in aged care work several jobs at different facilities. That's been a key way the virus has spread. We can't get a better situation for working people in this state or elsewhere if we are not prepared to criticise the actions of leaders such as Daniel Andrews.

Fortunately, some workers and unionists have taken stop-work actions to protect worker and community health and safety. Coles cold storage warehouse workers stopped work to fight for pandemic leave and other vital safety measures. And JBS meat workers refused to go back to an unsafe situation. While these incidents have been isolated, there are workers fighting back. There are rank-and-file unionists attempting to organise, whether supported by their union officials or not, in schools, call centres, universities, hospitality, transport and more.

We need a new political force in Australian politics, one that stands up to the bosses, that is unafraid to take on politicians and governments of all stripes. The Victorian Socialists are running in council elections this year, as one part of building a socialist alternative to the Labor Party. It's an alternative that puts health and life before profits. An alternative that's based on the collective power of people who know how it feels to have to scrape together money to pay the bills, but who also know what it means to stand up to the powerful. It's all of us – workers, students, pensioners, migrants, refugees, welfare recipients and public housing residents – standing together to declare that we're sick of a politics built on screwing us over at every turn, and we're here to change everything.

The author is the Victorian Socialists candidate for mayor of Melbourne.

About Fightback (Aotearoa/ Australasia)

Fightback is a trans-Tasman socialist media project with a magazine, a website, and other platforms. We believe that a structural analysis is vital in the task of winning a world of equality and plenty for all. Capitalism, our current socio-economic system, is not only exploiting people and planet – but is designed to operate this way. Therefore, we advocate a total break with the current system to be replaced by one designed and run collectively based on principles of freedom, mutual aid, and social need.

Fightback is a trans-Tasman organization, operating in Aotearoa and Australia. In the modern era of free movement across the Tasman, ‘Australasia’ is becoming a reality in a way it has not been since the 19th century. So many New Zealanders (tauiwi as well as tangata whenua) now live and work in Australia – and decisions made in one country increasingly impact the other, as the inter-governmental controversy surrounding the Manus Island detention camp shows.

We wish to engage socialists from both sides of the Tasman – in particular, socialists from Aotearoa living and working in Australia – to continue the lines of analysis and directions of organization which we have been pursuing. Beyond the dogmas of ‘sect Marxism’; beyond national boundaries; towards a genuinely decolonised, democratic, feminist and queer-friendly anti-capitalism.

We recognise that capitalism was imposed in Aotearoa and Australia through colonisation. While we draw substantially on European whakapapa and intellectual traditions, we seek to break the unity of the European colonial project, in favour of collective self-determination and partnership between tangata whenua and tauiwi. We recognise that this must be a learning process.

While we draw inspiration and lessons from history, theoretical agreement on past revolutions is not the basis for our unity. Rather, we unify around a common programme for transformation here and now.

For an expanded discussion of this programme, please see the pamphlet What Is Fightback?

Fightback’s Ten-Point Programme

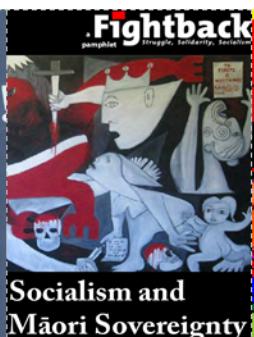
Fightback stands for the following core programme, and for building institutions of grassroots power in the working class and oppressed groups to bring them about:

- Constitutional transformation based on indigenous self-determination and workers power. Indigenous and worker co-ops to operate as guardians over public resources.
- Secure, appropriate and meaningful work for those who want it, with a shorter working week. The benefit system to be supplemented with a Universal Basic Income, removal of punitive sanctions.
- International working-class solidarity. Close the Detention Centres. Open borders to Australia and Aotearoa, full rights for migrant workers. Recognise Pacific peoples’ rights to self-determination, Australia and Aotearoa to contribute to a ‘no-strings’ development fund for Pacific nations. Opposition to all imperialist ventures and alliances; neither Washington nor Moscow.
- No revolution without women’s liberation. Full funding for appropriate, community-driven abuse prevention and survivor support, free access to all reproductive technologies, public responsibility for childcare and other reproductive work. The right to full, safe expression of sexuality and gender identity.
- An ecosocialist solution to climate change. End fossil fuel extraction, expand green technology and public transport, and radically restructure industrial food production.
- Freedom of information. End corporate copyright policies in favour of creative commons. Public support for all media technologies, expansion of affordable broadband internet to the whole country. An end to government spying.
- Abolish prisons, replace with restorative justice and rehabilitation.
- Universal right to housing. Expansion of high-density, high-quality public housing, strict price controls on privately owned houses. Targeted support to end involuntary homelessness.
- Fully-funded healthcare at every level. Move towards a health system based on informed consent, remove inequities in accident compensation, opposition to “top-down” efforts to change working people’s behaviour.
- Fully-funded education at every level, run by staff and students. Funding for all forms of education and research, enshrining indigenous knowledge as a core part of the curriculum.

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